

35¢
Avon

FANTASY READER

A Complete Novelle
"THE POWER PLANET"
by Murray Leinster

Also

WILLIAM H. HODGSON
AUGUST DERLETH
A. MERRITT
H. G. WELLS
H. RUSSELL WAKEFIELD

*and
others*





INTRODUCTION

Bow down; I am the emperor of dreams;
I crown me with the million-colored sun
Of secret worlds incredible, and take
Their trailing skies for vestment . . .

So sang Clark Ashton Smith in his poem, "The Hashish-Eater," and though we are not addicts of oriental drugs, such might be the theme song of the AVON FANTASY READER. For our empire of dreams is fed from the ever-flowing currents of literature, and our crown is the crown of imagination. For us there lies open the myriad pages of fantasy, the countless volumes, new and ancient, and the innumerable magazines, extant and extinct, wherein may lie some vivid vision or spine-tingling tale worth the retelling.

In establishing the AVON FANTASY READER we seek to set up a periodic anthology at a price available to all wherein may be found, volume after volume, the outstanding creations of fantastic imagination by the leading fantasy writers. No type of imaginative romancing will be neglected.

A glance over the contents of this initial number will show the pattern we desire. In A. Merritt's THE WOMAN OF THE WOOD we will find an almost pure fantasy, a delightful masterpiece that will touch the heart and fire the soul. The field of the ghost story is represented primarily by August Derleth's THE

SHUTTERED HOUSE. And the weird tale of the sea finds its spokesman in William Hope Hodgson's THE VOICE IN THE NIGHT.

The science-fiction story, dealing in the marvels of science and the perils of futurity, is handled by a master of that field, Murray Leinster in his THE POWER PLANET.

All the multifold shadings that lie within the field will be found among the others; some combine futuristic conjecture with weird design such as Clark Ashton Smith's VAULTS of YOH-VOMBIS; others delve beyond the bounds of the past, or of the mind, and even peer behind the facade of the present to find horror and witchcraft. Robert E. Howard, Lord Dunsany, H. Russell Wakefield, and even H. G. Wells are here to show you the multifold faces of fantasy.

Above all, the AVON FANTASY READER is keen to serve you as the seeker of outstanding fantasies. We shall look forward to your letters wherein we may know what authors you want to see and what stories you would like brought from an undeserved obscurity to the light of our pages. We hope you enjoy this issue as much as we enjoyed gathering it together. Drop us a line to guide us in future journeyings among "secret worlds incredible."

—DONALD A. WOLLHEIM

Author's Acknowledgments

THE POWER PLANET by Murray Leinster. Copyright, 1931, by Radio-Science Publications, Inc. Rights now held by the Ziff-Davis Publishing Co.

THE SHUTTERED HOUSE by August Derleth, copyright, 1937, by the Popular Fiction Publishing Company; copyright, 1941, by August Derleth.

THE VOICE IN THE NIGHT from "Men of Deep Waters," by William Hope Hodgson. Copyrighted by William Hope Hodgson in the United States of America. Reprinted by permission of Lissie S. Hodgson.

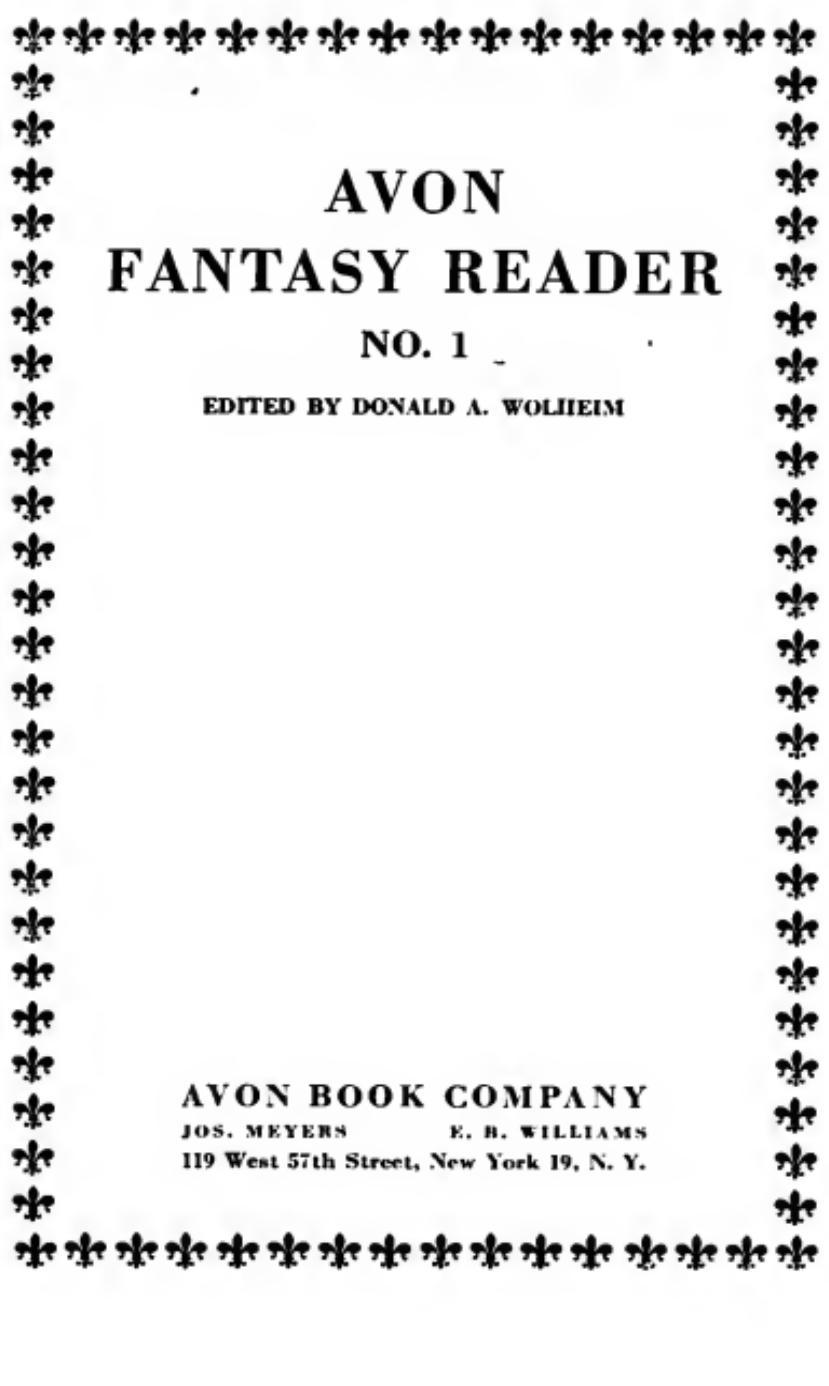
THE WOMAN OF THE WOOD by A. Merritt. Copyright, 1934, by the Popular Fiction Publishing Co.

THE TRUTH ABOUT PYECRAFT from "Twelve Stories and a Dream," by H. G. Wells. Reprinted by permission of H. G. Wells.

THE VAULTS OF YOH-VOMBIS, by Clark Ashton Smith, copyright, 1932, by The Popular Fiction Publishing Company; copyright, 1942, by Clark Ashton Smith; by permission of Arkham House.

THE CENTRAL FIGURE from "Imagine A Man In A Box," by H. Russell Wakefield. Reprinted by permission of D. Appleton & Co.

THE THREE INFERNAL JOKES from "The Last Book of Wonder," by Lord Dunsany, by permission of John W. Luce Company.



AVON
FANTASY READER

NO. 1

EDITED BY DONALD A. WOLHEIM

AVON BOOK COMPANY

JOS. MEYERS

E. B. WILLIAMS

119 West 57th Street, New York 19, N. Y.

Contents

| | |
|--|-----|
| THE POWER PLANET by Murray Leinster | 7 |
| THE SHUTTERED HOUSE by August Derleth | 45 |
| THE VOICE IN THE NIGHT by William Hope Hodgson | 57 |
| THE WOMAN OF THE WOOD by A. Merritt | 68 |
| THE TRUTH ABOUT PYECRAFT by H. G. Wells | 92 |
| THE VAULTS OF YOH-VOMBIS by Clark Ashton Smith | 101 |
| THE CENTRAL FIGURE by H. Russell Wakefield | 116 |
| THE THREE INFERNAL JOKES by Lord Dunsany | 125 |

AVON FANTASY READER: PUBLISHED EVERY OTHER MONTH. ISSUE NO. 1,
FEBRUARY, 1947. PUBLISHER: JOSEPH MEYERS. EDITOR: DONALD A. WOL-
HEIM. COPYRIGHT, 1947, BY AVON BOOK COMPANY . . PRINTED IN U.S.A.

For sheer prophetic ability, our hat is off to Murray Leinster. Few could have foretold the immense problems that confront mankind in the years following the discovery of atomic energy and rocket propulsion. Yet Murray Leinster (who is Will F. Jenkins) saw the problem, wrote of it, and posed the issue back in June 1931. Such an astral construction as the Power Planet has actually been drafted by technicians of the United States Army, and similar plans were found in the files of the German war industry. The space-traveling rocket is under construction in many places, guarded by the military of the world's nations. And the United Nations holds up the sociological side of Leinster's amazing prophecy. You will find it hard to believe that "The Power Planet" may not yet take place sometime within this century. For strength of character and accuracy of prediction, "The Power Planet" stands today, even more than when it was written, head and shoulders above other interplanetary projections. . . .

The Power Planet

by Murray Leinster

THE war-rocket wasn't sighted from Earth until it was three million miles out; well on its way to the Power Planet. Then it was too late to do anything about it, anyhow, and the world began to despair. London was gone; wiped out of existence by explosives that came hurtling down from rocket-ships two hundred miles above the atmosphere. Paris was still being bombed. The concussion of the ten and twenty-ton picrotoluol missiles was heard as far as Vienna. And from New York there had come the beginning of a message. "Rockets sighted overhead. Believed—" But that was all. No other message ever came out of New York.

And the war-rocket was three million miles out, headed for the Power Planet, just four days behind the mail. That was the last and worst news. When the solar-power plants, that had been built on the moon away back in 1960, were seen to collapse, and the Dugald beam transformers that received their powers went cold and lifeless, cities put up their radio screens. Yet Paris and London were bombed from somewhere out in space, and New York died in the middle of a radio message, and in the Supreme Council someone asked quietly

when the last message had been received from Rio de Janeiro, and nobody could answer him. But that did not seem important somehow. A war-rocket was on its way to the Power Planet. And the Power Planet was the last defense of Earth—and it was defenseless.

Harlowe said at lunch that it was quite true. He'd been using the main darkside telescope for a special observation, and he'd had a chance to swing it over on the moon after his observation was completed. And the solar-power plants were utterly destroyed as if by explosions. He'd disobeyed orders and turned the telescope on Earth. And there were dense clouds over London and Paris which showed no trace of water-vapor in the spectroscope, but did show carbon dioxide in high concentration and traces of organic and unstable nitrogen compounds, as if explosives had been used there, too, in vast quantities.

This was in the junior officers' mess of the Power Planet. Sunlight streamed in through the ports on the warm side of the disk. The light was filtered through Caldwell glass, of course, or it would have scorched the flesh it fell upon. At the other side of the mess-room other, unscreened ports looked out upon the vast void of outer space. It was utterly black, save for the unwinking lights of somehow hostile stars. But one bright speck, quite large and warm, was Earth. It was only forty-some million miles away, and was rapidly nearing conjunction with the Power Planet. But it couldn't be examined through a telescope. The darkside telescopes were turned off. Harlowe's chance to look at it had been pure luck.

"It's war, back there on earth," said Jimmy Cardigan. He lighted a cigarette, frowning. "Sure about the carbon dioxide?"

Harlowe nodded. Jimmy noticed, now, that he was more than a little pale.

"No question," he said composedly. "London's burnt, and Paris also, and the moon power-plants are smashed to bits. —Er— I've a father and mother and some sisters and what-nots in London. Or I did have. They're probably dead now."

Jimmy looked up quickly, then frowned more deeply still.

"Damn! Nothing on the bulletin-boards?"

Renoir spoke bitterly. "*Mais oui!* Of course there is news on the bulletin-board! There will be an occultation of Neptune's outer moon at 1:10 next watch, and Ceres reaches its perhelion position tomorrow, and it is believed that the solar disturbance in latitude 27° north will produce coronic disturbances of unusual beauty and interest. And the darkside telescopes are forbidden for two weeks! That is on the bulletin-board. But there is nothing said of Paris in ashes!"

He swore suddenly, very deeply and very bitterly. The other three at the mess-table were silent. Horthy, the Hungarian, was thinking

soberly. Hauss bit at his nails and stared at the table-cloth. Little Skeptsky, the Russian, looked from one to another of his companions with bright, inquisitive eyes like those of a fox-terrier.

"My sector is running at eighty per cent of full capacity," said Jimmy Cardigan slowly. "And that's queer, too. Dam' near twice normal."

"I know," said Hauss. He bit unhappily at his nails. "It is war. They are calling upon us for power. And maybe my country is fighting yours—or yours—or yours—"

"Yes," said Renoir savagely. "We have been friends. But we are men. When we know who fights on earth, some of us will be enemies. And we will hear soon. Let us shake hands now, before we kill each other!"

Jimmy Cardigan stirred.

"We're all fools," he growled. "We don't know who's fighting—"

"But the mail-rocket is due next week," said Skeptsky blandly. "Then we can fly intelligently at each other's throats. Let us wait until it comes."

The six at the mess-table stared miserably at each other. They had been friends, and friendship on the Power Planet is a very desirable thing, because that great black disk rolls alone through empty space many millions of miles from Earth, and there is mail exactly once in every six months and there is no radio communication at all.

"Let's agree right now," said Jimmy Cardigan angrily, "that what is happening back on earth shan't interfere with us! We're neutral. The Power Planet is international. We shouldn't take any part in this."

There was a sudden horrible din, off toward the center of the Planet. It was not natural. It was bloodcurdling. It was a colossal, insensate snarling roar that went horribly through all the echoing corridors. The six at the table in the junior officers' mess were stunned by its sheer violence. But before they could move it was shut off. Then a man's screaming could be heard, and that was perhaps more horrible still. But a pneumatic door shut suddenly and cut off that sound, and then alarm-gongs began to ring everywhere.

Where the Power Planet swam in space, there was bedlam for a short while. It did not show on the outside, of course. The huge black disk soared on in its unending course about the sun. Its segments could be seen to rotate slowly and sedately.

But that was where the Power Planet circled upon its duly calculated path. Some millions of miles away there was another oddity floating in the void. The oddity was a rocket, careening through nothingness with its eight tubes spouting vast quantities of fumes. It was not a large ship, as rockets go. It was thirty feet in diameter

and a hundred feet long. There were windows here and there about its body—tiny little windows by comparison with its size.

Closer, the windows could be seen to be of that marvelous Caldwell glass with its faint bluish tinge, which admits light freely, but neither permits the fierce heat of naked sunlight to penetrate, nor permits the devastating cold of shadows in the universal void to drain away heat from an object shielded by it.

The rocket-tubes spouted toward the sun. The black-painted symbol, "*H-J-L72. MAIL*" was reversed with regard to the earth. It was clear enough that the rocket was decelerating. It was thirty millions of miles out from Earth, with only one-third of its path yet to travel. It was already using its tubes to check its velocity.

A portlike door opened with a brisk swiftness in the blinding sunlight. A long metal arm reached out. A lens glittered at its end. A little scanning-disk began to twinkle vividly. The fumes of the rocket-tubes ceased abruptly.

Presently the long lens-bearing tube changed its position. The lens had pointed roughly toward the sun. It was as if an observation had been taken to find the Power Planet and check the course of the rocket. Now it pointed back toward the earth.

That telescope would bring into view an efflorescence of vapor far, far behind. Plainly another rocket. Two days out from earth—four days behind the mail-rocket. The telescope would bring the center of that other spout of vapor up to a size where it could be identified as a war-rocket. Five hundred feet long and fifty feet in diameter, built of aluminum alloy and equipped with the multitudinous tubes of a war-rocket meant for mere leaps about the earth; having a normal range of only forty or fifty thousand miles with free use of fuel, and usually unable even to reach the moon.

The mail-rocket went through space with an appearance of immobility. There was no wind. There was no air. There were no nearby objects to show its speed, as there was no resistance to require throbbing engines.

Suddenly there was a little puff of vapor from the base of the mail-rocket. A small puff. A minor puff, more like a shot than the blowing of a rocket-tube. And suddenly all eight of its propulsion-tubes began to emit furious blasts of gas. The rocket gained speed and gained speed and gained speed. . . . With only one-third of its route to travel, it seemed to flee in a panic-stricken fashion from the clumsily handled monster yet millions of miles away.

The alarm-bells rang in all the corridors of the Power Planet; in its sleeping-cabins and its mess-halls, in the baths and recreation-rooms and all its offices and instrument rooms.

"Stations!" snapped Jimmy Cardigan. "Get going!"

He ran.

The others were running too, and he lost them in seconds. He jumped into a one-man lift that would take him to his level, snapped over the lever, and went upward with almost the speed of a bullet. He didn't know what the emergency might be, of course. He was simply obeying orders through instinct, and the orders on the Planet are for every man to go to his station on any alarm.

Lights flashed past him. The first level. Darkness outside the lift again. The Planet is ten miles across its disk, and it rotates at a carefully calculated speed so that the centrifugal force at its outer edge is very nearly equal to the normal gravity on Earth. So that the nearer its center one goes, of course, the less is that force, and also the less impression of weight one has.

Lights again. The second level. The lift began to check its speed. Jimmy felt all sensation of weight leave him. He floated in mid-air in the slowing lift. He swung about and put his feet on the ceiling. The checking was sharp and steady. Out into the brilliant lights of the third level, a sharp curving in the lift-tube—and Jimmy braced himself against the side of the car—and the little lift turned smoothly over and the door flew open. Jimmy sprinted, right-side up again.

But the gongs were ringing "*No Emergency for this Section*" even as he reached his post. He slowed down, grunted, and began to ask questions.

His relief was slamming shut the closet that held the vacuum-suits.

"Hell, no!" he said gloomily, as Jimmy began to erupt interrogations. "All I know is the emergency-signal rang and a flock of pneumatic doors began shutting and I opened up the closet to get myself a suit handy."

Jimmy frowned. "There's a hell of a war back on Earth," he announced. "Maybe that had something to do with the alarm."

His relief looked at him sardonically.

"A war? Yeah? When did the mail come?"

"It hasn't come," said Jimmy impatiently. "It isn't due for a week, but I know there's a war."

"It isn't due for ten days," corrected his relief. "Like hell you know there's a war back on Earth. And what difference would it make, anyway?"

"You'll see," said Jimmy morosely. "Skeptsy seems to think we'll all go mad."

"Look at that meter," advised his relief morosely. "It's jumped

five per cent since I came on duty. Something's gone wrong or somebody's gone crazy. But who? I'm going to report it."

Jimmy looked at the meter showing the power-output for his sub-sector. The Power Planet, of course, is that vast man-made disk of metal set spinning about the sun to supply the earth with power. Everybody learns in his grammar-school textbooks of its construction just beyond the moon and of its maneuvering to its present orbit by a vast expenditure of rocket-fuel. Only forty million miles from the sun's surface, its sunward side is raised nearly to red heat by the blazing radiation. And the shadow side, naturally, is down to the utter cold of space. There is a temperature-drop of nearly seven hundred degrees between the two sides, and Williamson cells turn that heat-difference into electric current, with an efficiency of ninety-some per cent. Then the big Dugald tubes—they are twenty feet long, on the Power Planet—transform it into the beam which is focussed always on the Earth and delivers something over a billion horsepower to the various receivers that have been erected.

"It'll do no good," Jimmy told him. "The whole Planet is under overload. As I told you, there's a war on, back on Earth, and they're drawing on us for power. The moon power-plants have been blown up, and we're taking up the slack."

The G. C. gong rang loudly—General Communication. The Planet Commander's voice came out of the speaker.

"Der alarm a liddle while since," boomed old Ferdel's voice gutturally, "was der blowing-out of a Dugald tube in Sector G11 from oferload. Two men were killed. We obserf that more than de usual amount of power is being taken from der beam. For three days der load has been growing steadily. We are now delifering seventeen hundred million horsepower to der Earth and der demand shows no sign of decreasing. I order that eferybody be extra careful and extra figilant. We cannot baff accidents, at this time aboff all. We may be called upōn at any time for more power still. It is not ours to wonder why. It is only ours to delifer der power we are called upon to send. Remember; extra care and extra figilance! When der Earth calls upon us for power, we cannot and we must not fail!"

The speaker clicked. Jimmy Cardigan scratched his chin.

"He's scared," he observed. "We've been turning out just about a billion horsepower. The moon-plants turned out another quarter-billion. Now they're out of commission, we're doing our work and theirs too, and some extra. There's a war on, all right."

He turned away. His relief slumped back in his chair and watched the meters with a casual vigilance. Jimmy went on up another lift to the general observatory. It was nearly empty when he went into it. It had been deserted at the general alarm—now explained as the

blowing-out of a twenty-foot Dugald tube. Jimmy was the first man off-watch to return. A visiphone record was going on one of the visiphonographs. A girl's face, quite incredibly realistic in its stereoscopic projection, looked flirtatiously out at emptiness as she sang. . . . And neatly buckled against the wall was that contrivance little Skeptsky liked to fool with, here in the center of the disk where even artificial gravity was negligible—little compressed-air tanks that he strapped to his shoulders, with rocket-nozzles attached. He could fly lightly all about the place, and did, explaining blandly that he was practising at being an angel.

Jimmy went to one of the telescope eyepieces. He swung the lens—outside in empty space—over to the declination of Neptune. He seemed to be absorbed in looking, but actually he was listening intently.

But though his manner was entirely natural, Jimmy suddenly shifted a plug. To a darkside telescope. There was a flash in the eyepieces and they went dark. Turned off. He tried another. The same result. The darkside telescopes were cut off from the eyepieces in the central hall. Jimmy swore under his breath, though he was trying to break a direct order of the Planet Commander, and discipline on the Power Planet is strict indeed. He went grimly along the row of plugs controlling the darkside telescopes.

Blank. Every one of the darkside telescopes blank. Jimmy swore angrily. He tried the last plug, the main telescope, without any hope at all, but with a surging of impotent rebellion going through him. A star-field sprang into being before his eyes. Jimmy looked at his dials and swung them swiftly. Stars flashed past his eyes in blinding streaks. Then the earth itself. Blindingly bright and huge. It looked bigger than a football and the continental masses were distinctly green, and he could see the polar ice-caps clearly; even that downward-jutting streak of white, which is the inland ice-sheet of Greenland.

Jimmy centered on San Francisco and turned the magnification-knob. The globe swelled enormously and leaped toward him in the eyepieces. He could no longer see the whole of it. He could no longer see even all of North America. It swelled and grew large as if he were falling toward it at an impossible speed, the speed of light itself. And then the telescope reached its limit of magnification and he looked down upon the city as if from a height of two hundred miles. With the hazy white cloud above it, Jimmy only occasionally got glimpses of even that unsatisfactory pattern. But he saw a flash, suddenly, and after it a vast billowing-up of vapor. It looked like hardly more than a spark, but to be seen from an apparent distance

of two hundred miles, and an actual distance two hundred thousand times greater, a spark would need to be huge.

Jimmy swore bitterly, and watched. Another spark. Another. . . . He knew what was happening. San Francisco was being destroyed. With ten and twenty-ton bombs of picrotoluol. They make craters half a mile to a mile across, and there is nothing left but chaos beyond. There were rocket-ships at work a few hundred miles above the earth's surface, and they were smashing the city as a man might smash an ant's nest. . . . He couldn't watch. He swung the telescope away, reducing magnification to pick up the moon.

He found it and turned the magnification up again. The colossal walls at the lunar poles, which once had been filled with Williamson cells just like the disk of the Power Planet. . . . They were destroyed. Jimmy could see one irregular segment alone, still standing above a crater-mountain. It was tiny but infinitely distinct upon the atmosphereless moon. But as he turned up the magnification to look more closely, yet there was a vast billowing of vapor—and vapor spreads with an astounding rapidity in empty space—and that was blotted out too.

The moon dwindled swiftly as with shaking fingers he turned back the knobs toward normal. He watched it shrink, but he was mentally staggered by what he had seen. And then he saw a tiny golden plume of vapor, far out in space. He caught it before it shot out of the field of vision, and enlarged it and enlarged. . . .

"The mail-rocket," he said unsteadily to himself. "A week ahead of time. . . ."

Five minutes later he made another discovery. And he regarded that with a peculiar crawling sensation at the back of his neck. Then he shut off the telescope, and shivered a little, and stepped before one of the telephones. He pressed the call-button.

"The Planet Commander," said Jimmy Cardigan rather grimly. "An Emergency report."

In seconds the screen flashed into light and the plump, worried face of the Planet Commander looked out at him. Jimmy was already standing stiffly at attention. He clicked off a formal salute.

"Sir," he said, and swallowed, "I have to report that while disobeying your recent order against using the darkside telescopes, I sighted the mail-rocket, six days out from earth but still accelerating at full force."

The Planet Commander glared at him.

"Very well. You are relieved from duty for disobeying orders. Go to your quarters."

"Yes, sir," said Jimmy, and swallowed once more. "But also, sir, there is another rocket on the way here. It is only about two days

out from earth, sir, but it started to run into the power beam and is now using all its rocket-tubes to keep away from that danger. It is much larger than the mail-rocket, sir. In—in fact, sir, it looks to me like a war-rocket, especially the way it's handled. At a guess, sir, it's on its way out here to treat us like the moon power-stations."

From where the second cloud of vapor spread out in emptiness, the earth was still a sphere of respectable size. It was only three millions of miles away and even with the naked eye it was more than a speck of light, and the moon was more brilliant than even the brightest of the fixed stars. The fact that the earth had surface-markings could be made out by an observer, even without low-power binoculars, if the observer were on the great silvery shape that went hurtling through space with a writhing mass of rocket-fumes behind it.

That shape was shining metal, with a curious bulge and many windows at its pointed end, and a multitude of queer tubes stretched along its side with jointed bulbous joints so that they could be pointed in any direction.

Far out in nothingness the Power Planet hung, and from one spot on its shadow-side a luminescent stream of radiance stabbed across space. That was the Dugald beam, carrying its hundreds of millions of horsepower to the earth. At the Power Planet it was a hundred yards across, and it was luminescent even in emptiness. By the time it reached Earth it was a full eight thousand miles across, so that Dugald-beam receivers anywhere on the surface could tap its power.

That beam would have told the war-rocket's destination. It seemed to be skirting the edge of the powerful beam—here invisible because dispersed. The earth was between its solitary moon and the course of this great war-craft. And the rocket, three million miles out, was far beyond the moon's orbit, anyhow. The only spot for which an armed space-vessel could be headed was the Power Planet. There alone could men be found. But it would be considered odd that a war-rocket should essay so long a journey. They are normally designed only for huge leaps about the earth, for the destruction of cities by the dropping of bombs from space beyond the atmosphere. To travel the forty-odd million miles to the Power Planet there would have to be extra fuel stores supplied, and there ought to be a scrupulous husbanding of fuel, vastly unlike the maneuvering of a war-vessel in the gravitational field of earth.

The silvery shape with its many movable tubes sped on. It was forty-two hours out from earth. Its rate of acceleration made objects within it seem to weigh twice as much as they did on earth. It was gaining speed at the rate of one mile a minute, and in forty-two

hours at that acceleration had traveled something over three million miles. In one hundred and eight hours it should be half-way to the Power Planet, and if it decelerated at the same rate, should reach its destination in nine days exactly from the time of its departure.

Jimmy Cardigan was the first to pick out the mail-rocket with his naked eyes. The darkside telescopes were still obstinately forbidden by the Planet Commander. The main telescope, which had been left switched on by pure chance, was definitely shunted away from the general observatory now. Harlowe and Jimmy Cardigan were in that vast central room where gravity did not exist. They talked wildly. Harlowe was shaking and bitter. Jimmy was filled with a sick rage. Jimmy had seen the bombs falling that had reduced San Francisco to a churned-up mass of Earth. Harlowe had seen the smoke-cloud which told of London's destruction.

Harlowe said woodenly:

"I had a sister who'd be just twelve now. . . . Full of fun, she was. . . . They—they needn't have blown her to atoms. . . . Whoever they are."

"Whoever they are!" repeated Jimmy fiercely. "My God, Harlowe! Who could have done it? New York was covered with yellow haze. That's gone, too. And San Francisco and Rio, London and Paris. . . . Who could have done it? What fiends from hell would have done it?"

A voice spoke blandly, some ten feet or so above their heads.

"Men did it, Jimmy."

It was little Skeptsky, flying lightly about the two-hundred-foot room where nothing had any weight. He had the compressed-air tanks strapped to his shoulders with those astoundingly efficient nozzles that are used—in a larger form—by space-rockets themselves. He could fly, here, with a propulsive force of a few ounces only. He landed lightly beside them.

"I am practising at being an angel," he observed placidly. "When that war-rocket gets here, a little practice should come in handy. I have lived a highly moral life, you see."

Jimmy stared out the darkside port again. Telescopes were available in plenty to regard the sun. There was a scanning-disk instrument available which would bring Neptune within a thousand miles. But that was on the bright side of the Power Planet. Where the earth swam, bright and warm, the telescopes were turned off. Only men's eyes could gaze hungrily, enragedly, at the speck from which they had come and which held all of human life except the Power Planet itself.

"I understand," said Jimmy harshly, "just why—" He stopped, and pointed with a trembling finger. "Look! Look there!"

Outside the port, amid the unwinking stars, there was a small pinkish speck. It was infinitely tiny, but it had an indefiniteness of outline, a haziness of edge, that marked it off from all the other tiny lights.

"The mail-rocket!" said Jimmy. "Now we'll know who——"

Little Skeptsky cocked his head on one side and regarded the dot of light intently.

"It is moving," he said presently. "Either it is the mail-rocket, or it is the war-rocket that has destroyed it."

"It's the mail," said Jimmy. "Nothing could have overtaken the mail. Not with the start it had. Now we'll know who those devils are!"

Little Skeptsky said placidly:

"It will be very helpful to know. Very helpful. But it won't be here for hours. I shall go and practise being an angel some more. I suppose the war-rocket will be here tomorrow. It is a pity there are no harps on the Planet, here. I could practise that, too, while flying."

He reached over his shoulder, opened the pet-cocks of his compressed-air tanks, and soared lightly away in the vast room in which nothing had any weight. He looked very strange, swooping lightly here and there in the vast gravitationless room.

Jimmy Cardigan and Harlowe watched the speck of pinkish light move very slowly indeed across a field of stars. They heard, very faintly, the pumps of the reception-cell at work. Those pumps would exhaust the reception-cell near the center of the Planet's disk, and the mail-rocket would be maneuvered within—it would be tiny in the vastness of the reception-cell—and the great outer door would be closed and air allowed to return. And then the doors of the rocket could be opened and the people within it could emerge.

Harlowe and Jimmy watched the pinkish dot which was the mail-rocket. It was very near, because they could detect its motion. In half an hour it was sensibly larger. In an hour they could make out the focus of the swirling vapor which was really all they had seen before. Half an hour more still and they could see the actual body of the mail-rocket as a glittering speck. Now the exhaust of the rocket-tubes reached the Power Planet itself. All outer space was obscured by a pinkish glow, through which the utterly black shadow of the Planet's disk cut a gap reaching out to infinity. But there was one new phenomenon. The Dugald beam that now carried more than a billion and a half horsepower to Earth became incandescent. Even in emptiness, its path had been faintly luminescent. With the infinitesimal particles of the rocket-exhaust swirling into it, it became

a source of blinding light. In that beam of unthinkable power the exhaust-particles were broken down into atoms. The atoms into electrons. Unimaginable combinations and recombinations of the ultimate particles of matter took place. Where the exhaust-particles were thickest, the light was as vivid as that at the surface of the sun.

"I'll say," said Jimmy Cardigan grimly, "they must have been in a hurry, when they have to decelerate like this! They're running all eight tubes at full capacity. They ought to be losing speed at over a hundred feet per second deceleration."

It was true. The rocket was being checked with a force which would make objects within it seem to weigh nearly four times their weight on Earth. It was outrageous. It was against all orders, against all rules of space-navigation. But four tubes cut out suddenly. Then two more. Then another. And suddenly the vapor cleared away—devoured by the inconceivable emptiness all about—and the mail-rocket hung rotating slowly a bare hundred yards from the port through which Harlowe and Jimmy looked.

There was a pause, but of seconds only. The frenzied haste, which alone could have caused the mail-rocket to continue its speed so far, was communicated to the Power Planet itself. Little figures in the rotund vacuum-suits of the Planet, seemed to materialize in the glare of the huge searchlights that now played upon the dark-side skin. Those figures leaped upward, dragging coils of cable in their effortless flight. One of them had miscalculated, and came to a stop some four or five yards from the rocket's base. But he turned a switch and the anchoring-magnet jerked him to the wide band of white metal above the rocket-tubes. The other cable was already attached. They grew taut and the mail-rocket drew closer and closer, and vanished into the maw of the Planet itself.

The attention-signal rang, and the G. C. speaker said suavely:

"The mail from Earth has arrived. It will be sorted and delivered within the shortest possible time."

It clicked off and was silent.

And Jimmy Cardigan had been impatient before for the mail to come, but now he was literally in a fever. All through the long corridors of the Power Planet that same passion of impatience was developing. Men who go six months without mail or news develop a certain phlegmatic calm. It is necessary. But when mail arrives, they are half-mad until they receive it.

The G. C. phone clicked.

"Junior Lieutenants Cardigan, Hauss, Skeptsky, Horthby, and Harlowe," said the suave voice. *"Report to the Planet Commander's office at once."*

Skeptsky's eyes widened. He obediently doffed his flying device and buckled it to the floor. Jimmy said harshly:

"Harlowe! Snap out of it! Special duty for us!"

Harlowe came blubbering with them. But presently he fought down his sobs. When the three of them stood teetering from the lack of weight in the anteroom to the Planet Commander's office, Harlowe was red-eyed and pitiful to look at, but his jaw was set desperately.

The inner office door was open and the sound of voices came from within. There was a certain silvery timbre to one of them, at which Jimmy Cardigan's face went blank and full of amazement. There is never any woman allowed on the Power Planet. They are forbidden just as small-arms are forbidden. A bullet, fired recklessly, might crack a port and kill everybody in a subsector when the air within went pouring out the opening. Women on the Power Planet would be more dangerous still, because the monotony is deadly.

The Planet Adjutant came out, the magnetic soles of his shoes clicking on the metal floor.

"Junior Lieutenants Cardigan, Harlowe, and Skeptsky," said little Skeptsky mildly.

"Go on," said the Adjutant suavely. "It is all right."

They went in. The Planet Commander, puffy-faced and worried, sat at his desk with the thigh-grips over his legs. There were three other people in the office. One was a gray-haired young man, with the sharp lines of intense strain etched between his nostrils and the ends of his lips. He was smoking, inhaling savagely. The second was a fat man, still gray-faced from the terrific strain of having his weight increased four-fold during the rocket's deceleration. The third was a girl, white and tired from the same strain, but listening intently as the Planet Commander growled orders into the microphone before him.

"Beginning at der first hour of der second watch," he was rumbling, "der general ventilating system will be put out of action. Der emergency ventilating apparatus for each sub-sector will be used exclusively. All communication between der subsectors will be by der air-locks." He paused, grunted, and rumbled again. "All facuum-suits will be immediately inspected. Extra tanks will be supplied to each one and connected. Beginning with der same hour, all persons will wear facuum-suits exclusifely. Der face-plates may be left open, but ready for immediate use. Post these orders on der bulletin-boards immediately."

His heavy-lidded, worried eyes fell upon the three junior lieutenants. He grunted.

"Where are der rest of you? I haff special duty. There are six of

you who know too much. I put you on special duty and order you to keep der mouths shut."

The gray-haired young man said crisply:

"If I may suggest, sir, if you'll appoint a guide who can inform me about the resources of the Planet, I may be able to work out some system of defense."

The Commander's eye fell upon Skeptsky, with the quartermaster's department emblem on his collar.

"You," said old Ferdel, "take him wherever he wants to go and tell him anything he asks."

"Yes, sir," said little Skeptsky.

The gray-faced fat man said something inaudible. The Commander waved his hand impatiently.

"You," he snapped to Harlowe. "Take charch of him. Take him to der outer rim. Giff him medical attention and let him rest where his weight will be normal. And you—" He regarded the girl worriedly. "*Himmel!* Lieutenant Cardigan!"

"Yes, sir," said Jimmy.

"You are der aide-de-camp of Miss Blair. Her escort and her protector. You will instruct her in der use of facuum-suits and so on. Find her a cabin. She stays with us until der next conjunction—if we are alive to see it. You are excused."

The girl smiled tiredly and gave Jimmy her hand. Harlowe and the fat man were already leaving the commander's cabin. Following, Jimmy helped her as she staggered. The Commander's cabin is close to the center of the Planet, so that one's weight there is very slight indeed.

"I'll take you first," said Jimmy formally, "where you can walk without falling all about. Then I suppose you'll want to rest."

"I'm—resting now," said the girl faintly. "It was that awful deceleration. . . ."

Jimmy took her to a lift. He crowded in beside her and shot downward, toward the outer rim.

"I'm ordered not to talk," he said an instant later, "but I'd appreciate it if you'd tell me who's fighting, on Earth."

She tried again to smile, and failed. Her eyes were closing from fatigue.

"E-everybody is fighting," she said drearily. "Everybody. . . ."

She fell incontinently asleep in the lift which went speeding down its narrow shaft toward the outer rim of the Power Planet.

Sections of the mail-rocket seemed torn away, as the huge doors that closed in the cargo-sections swung wide. One-half its shell was coated with frost-crystals, and smoked furiously in the vividly

lighted reception-cell. Little droplets of liquid could be seen to form, and bubble up into froth, and vanish only to appear again.

The mail-bags came out and went floating up in a steady stream full fifty feet aloft to the pneumatic conveyor which would take them to the sorting-room. Bales, bundles, packages in incredible numbers and varieties. Bedlam arose in the reception-cell.

"Case visiphone records!"

"Check!"

"Up she goes! Case books!"

"Check!"

"Up she goes! Case medicines!"

"Check!"

Half a dozen long cases came tumbling down.

"One three-inch gun. What in hell's that for?"

"Check!"

"One three-inch gun!"

"Check!"

"Five hundred three-inch shells!"

"Check!"

There was a sudden break in the bedlam all about. A semi-silence fell as certain cases were brought out of their repository in the rock-ets' sides with infinite caution.

"Four cases picrotoluol!" The checker's voice was hushed.

"Check!"

"Four dozen torpedo-rockets!"

"Check!"

Curiosity almost suspended the unloading of these last items. Ten-foot contrivances, shaped like fish, with little radio antennae now folded back against their bodies and rocket-tubes out of all proportion to their size projecting here and there.

"What the hell?—They must think we got neighbors, out here!—Funny little gadgets, ain't they?—I never saw 'em before——"

The work slackened as men crowded about to look.

"'Shun!" roared the petty officer in charge of the stevedore gang. "You guys wanna get your mail? Speed up! Unload them cases! Go on——"

The reception-cell in which the mail-rocket lay became again a scene of ant-like activity.

Renoir came by as Jimmy smoked furiously at the end of a four-hour vigil outside his own cabin door. Jimmy looked up. Renoir held up a frost-bitten thumb. He'd been out on the cold side of the Planet with a crew of mechanics, mounting three-inch guns.

"*Mon ami*," said Renoir wryly. "you have no idea what a futile

thing a cannon can seem, until you have mounted three of them to defend seventy-five square miles of surface. I thought of you, Jimmy, and translated it to miles! *Mon dieu!* We had vacuum-suits, and we turned on the heat, but working on that metal was terrible. Hauss is winding the cannon and mountings now, poor devil. At the temperature of space, if they are not kept warm, they will be so brittle that the first shot will shatter them to bits. He is winding resistance-wire about all of them, near to suicide because he is afraid that the war-rocket on the way to us is German."

Jimmy said eagerly:

"What is it?"

"*Peste!*" said Renoir disgustedly. "Don't you know? I said that you would know by now. The lady——"

"Asleep," said Jimmy gloomily. "I asked her who was fighting and she said 'Everybody' and then went to sleep in the lift. I carried her in my cabin and laid her on the bunk and she's slept ever since."

"The same with the rocket-crew, all but the commander," said Renoir. "They went to sleep and slept like logs. But the rocket-commander is dancing about like a flea, with Skepsky in charge."

"No news in the mail?"

"None," said Renoir. "Family letters, and so on. The regular mail-rocket accumulation, only closed a week ahead of time. No hint of any international troubles. It must have burst like a thunderstorm on Earth, this war."

Jimmy said disgustingly: "And I'm shepherding a woman around!"

Renoir looked at him sharply. Then he grinned.

"Perhaps the Commander complimented you in picking you out, Jimmy. Or perhaps it was an insult to assume you could be trusted. But, *mon dieu*, I haven't seen a woman in a year and a half! I shall fall instantly in love with her, unless she is cross-eyed. Haven't you become sentimental yet?"

"Hell, no!" growled Jimmy. "I've been swearing at her for existing, ever since she came."

"Good!" said Renoir. He looked about and added in a low tone: "No kidding, Jimmy, I would apply to the Adjutant for small-arms, if I were you. We all die within thirty-six hours, and there are always fools. . . ."

Jimmy said, "Something in what you say, Renoir. Thanks. I will."

Renoir grinned a farewell and went off, swaggering down the corridor. Jimmy looked after him. "*We die in thirty-six hours*," he'd said. That meant the war-rocket should arrive in a day and a half—six watches. And Jimmy still didn't know what nation had sent it.

He was scowling gloomily when the door of his cabin opened behind him. The girl had gotten up. She was trying to smile.

"I—heard that," she said quietly.

Jimmy started to protest politely. She silenced him with a wave of her hand.

"Please! I heard everything. Even that you've been cursing me. I don't blame you. I didn't want to come. But my father sent me. He said this was the only safe place to put me in." She paused. "My father's the President, you know."

Jimmy knitted his brows.

"The President? . . . Oh, you mean of the United States?"

She nodded.

"That's fine," said Jimmy politely. "You'll want to eat now, won't you?"

She looked at him as if she were startled. But Jimmy was unfeignedly unimpressed. He was too much worried about other matters than his charge's social standing. When at last she nodded, admitting hunger, he led the way to the mess-room and ordered food for her.

"You have vegetables?" she said in surprise.

"Oh, we raise some," said Jimmy absently. "For vitamins, mostly. There's a certain amount of grass, over on the G segment. Ten or fifteen acres, I think. They turn out a crop every three or four weeks. —I say, would you mind telling me who's fighting, back on earth? Old Ferdel is keeping it dark, but I'm ordered not to talk, anyhow."

"I don't know who's fighting," said the girl.

Jimmy looked at her.

"I don't!" she insisted. "Nobody knows! My father's been expecting something like this for years. It's the newest form of warfare. My father said wars started out as invasions, degenerated into raids, and finally became practically duels between tiny professional armies—and that the next step would be assassinations. Declarations of war, up to now, have always been made because hostilities had begun, not as a prelude to them. And the more damage a nation can do before the other side starts to fight back, the better off it will be from a military standpoint. The nation that's making war on the rest of the world is doing it secretly. The bombing of cities from rocket-ships has been done secretly. When the mail-rocket left earth it still wasn't known who had decided to make war on the Supreme Council. But some nation had done it. It was smashing civilization as fast as it could. Unless it was found out. . . ."

The gray-haired young rocket-commander from Earth was talking to the Power Planet commander. Earth rotated slowly on a screen against the wall. The image was taken from the main dark-

side telescope, and it showed the whole disk of earth and a section of star-studded sky. Among those star-images there was a blurred, indefinite pinkish spot.

"This is the enemy," said the man from earth. He put his finger on the speck of pinkish radiance on the screen. "The enemy of the whole human race. Because it's coming out here to kill us, and the Power Planet is the only hope of earth. We've got to destroy that rocket somehow!"

"I cannot understand," Ferdel boomed suddenly, "how efen der enemy of der rest of der world would dare to destroy us. Our power goes to his nation. Without our power his radio screens will be useless. His cities will be exposed to der bombardment of der rest of der world."

The gray-haired young man said bitterly:

"No! The enemy has atomic power. It's known, now! Four years ago Professor Kettle worked out the solution of the atomic-power problem. He reported it to the Supreme Council. The Science Committee sent for him. Verification was only a formality. Professor Kettle has done too much to have his word doubted. A thirty-man plane was sent for him, one of the official Council planes. It took off with him and all his notes and formulas. And over the North Atlantic somewhere, it disappeared. In fair weather, with never a trace of it or its crew ever discovered. It was a mystery then, what had happened. It isn't a mystery now. The Enemy got him. That was the one thing needed to make a war like this possible. The Enemy got him and forced him—perhaps by torture—to show them all he knew. And so the Enemy doesn't need the Power Planet. It can afford to destroy us here."

Old Ferdel said grimly:

"Der Power Planet fails when it is destroyed. No sooner. We are men. We serf der world. When we die, der Dugald beam may cease. But not before!"

Little Skeptsky looked up from a pocket memorandum pad.

"Excuse me, sir. How much fuel does a war-rocket usually carry?"

The mail-rocket commander looked at him sharply.

"One-tenth of its weight. Why?"

"I'm figuring," said Skeptsky mildly. "The war-rocket on the way here has been running at twice-normal acceleration since leaving earth. For a mail-rocket the fuel-consumption is one one-thousandth of rocket weight in fuel per hour of normal acceleration. Running at twice normal acceleration and deceleration. . . ."

The rocket-commander's eyes flashed suddenly.

"Go on!"

"Will require twice as much fuel," said Skeptsky carefully. "And

the war-rocket on the way here will be using two one-thousandths of its weight per hour. Its trip will take it two hundred and eight hours. Four hundred and sixteen one-thousandths of its weight. Two-fifths. Four times its normal storage of fuel. How much more can it carry?"

The mail-rocket commander said hungrily:

"Anyway, it won't get back!" He seized Skeptsky's memorandum pad and began to calculate swiftly.

"Maximum acceleration is six, with normal load . . . tons . . . six per cent for arm. . . . The more fuel it carries, the more it has to burn for acceleration at the beginning . . . times seven. . . . There's no war-rocket yet designed that could carry more than two-fifths of its weight in fuel, even skimping on bombs!"

Little Skeptsky said mildly:

"It's odd that the rocket heading here is expecting to arrive with its tanks empty. They must be desperate for speed."

"They are," said the rocket-commander crisply. "The sooner we're destroyed, the sooner the rest of the world is helpless."

"Then," said Skeptsky, "either they've got a new fuel, or they expect to capture fuel for their return from us. We'd better put a spectroscope on the rocket-fumes. If the fuel is the same everybody else uses, we'll know their tanks will be nearly empty when they get here. We may be able to temporize with the commander of this rocket."

"Ah, yes!" he said softly. "Temporize! We'll know he wants to capture us, and not destroy the Planet. Go get your spectro-photographs, Lieutenant. While he's trying to destroy us. . . ."

Little Skeptsky got up and trotted away, his eyes shining. The rocket-commander suddenly yawned prodigiously.

"Wake me up when he comes back," he said wearily. "My God! I'm tired! I think maybe we can do something, now. . . ."

Jimmy and the girl were at the outer edge of the Power Planet, and there were ports on three sides—both walls and the floor—that looked out upon emptiness. Stars gleamed upward from beneath their feet, and the centrifugal force of the rotating Planet flung them against the flooring with the effect of earthly gravity. The sensation, looking down through the floor-ports, was that of a drop of millions of miles. There is no other place in the universe where so terrifying a sensation of height is reached as at the outer edge of the Power Planet.

Jimmy led the way to a lift. They crowded in it, both of them, with their baggy vacuum-suits filling all the spare space. It shot up swiftly, and abruptly checked. They got out, crawled through one

door, closed it, opened another door, and crawled out again. Another lift was waiting.

Again they shot upward. Again it checked, and they passed through a second air-lock into the next section. Now, Jimmy led the way through a long corridor. Ports opened here and there, looking out upon star-studded space. A larger port came into view, a five-foot hemisphere of glass projecting slightly from the dark side. There was nothing to be seen, to be sure. Nothing but the universe of stars, with the bright speck which was earth, and a faint but distinctly visible comet-like glow which moved slightly as Jimmy pointed to it.

Lights glittered suddenly out in emptiness. The huge searchlights mounted on the central tower flamed into being. They were pointed, all of them, in the direction of the approaching war-rocket. They began to flash on and off, and off and on, in the unrhythmic pulsation of a visual signal.

Jimmy went back to the lift with the monstrous, easy leaps the negligible gravity of the Third level permitted. He vanished into the tiny tube-lift. It shot upward. The girl was left alone.

There were lights near her. She found a switch and turned them off. Then with her face close to the glass of the hemispherical port, she stared out breathlessly. She could see the dark surface of the Power Planet, now. It was terrifying to look at. It was black, and it bulged here and there, and she saw another glass dome a long, long distance off. Then, quite suddenly, she saw black shapes moving about a still blacker object, all of them at an exact right angle to what was—to the girl—the vertical.

That was confusing. It was bewildering. But custom helped her eyes, and she could see that the smaller dark objects were men in baggy vacuum-suits, expanded and rotund in the emptiness of space. She picked out, gradually, cables trailing behind them as they moved. She imagined heating-elements in the suits, and by a flash of inspiration, electro-magnets in the shoes. Then she realized what it was that they served. A three-inch gun.

It flashed soundlessly. Again and again and again. . . .

She stared out at the approaching war-rocket. It had shut off its rocket-tubes since her last glance at it, and now it was merely a speck of brilliant silver, drifting idly in unutterably vivid sunlight.

"It's far away," said the girl desperately to herself. The mail-rocket on which she had left Earth had been escorted beyond the atmosphere by American war-rockets. She remembered what she'd been told of their distance. "It's forty—fifty miles away. . . ."

Suddenly, only a little distance from the Power Planet, there was a vast blaze of yellowish flame. It could not have been more than a

mile from the dark side of the disk. For an instant it wiped out the universe, leaving only flame beyond the port the girl looked through.

Then there was nothingness. And there was not even the sound of an explosion.

And then there was another monstrous explosion. Its globular flame actually licked the Power Planet's disk.

And another. . . .

In the abysmal darkness, Jimmy could "feel" the clapping of his magnetic shoe-soles upon the outer skin of the Power Planet. That noise was uncannily distinct. He could sense too, the less loud, but still startlingly distinct clankings of the feet of those about him. A dozen of them, in all, in the utter cold and airlessness of the dark side of the Planet. They moved infrequently, careful not to tangle their trailing cables.

The gun flashed, and something beat at Jimmy's body. It was a bewildering sensation to a man who for a year—two conjunctions of the Planet—had felt no wind other than the rhythmic pulsations of the ventilation in the Power Planet's corridors. And here in empty space. . . . But it was the blast of gas from the gun. A shell went soundlessly off toward nothingness.

The huge searchlights flickered on and off, and off and on, un- rhythmically, spelling out a message in the international signal code.

"We know—your fuel is insufficient—are you prepared—to make terms—interrogation—message ends.—We know—your fuel insufficient—"

Over and over the searchlights sent the signal. Meanwhile the guns flashed and flamed.

Old Ferdel had given a grim message over the G. C. system an hour before. His voice had come out of the multitude of phones all over the Planet, while his face looked pugnaciously out of the speaker-screens.

"Gentlemen of der Power Planet crew," he'd rumbled. *"There is a war on Earth. A war-rocket is on der way here to destroy us for der conquest of Earth. We fight. And der fight is not hopeless, because der war-rocket is being handled by a verdammt fool. He has used all der fuel he can carry in hurrying to get here. We shall signal him, offering to giff him fuel for his return in exchange for all his armament. These are our terms. If we proof to him that he cannot capture der Planet without destroying it, we proof to him that in destroying der Planet he also destroys himself. Therefore I demand der loyalty and der assistance of efery man, without regard to his nationality. I do not know der nationality of der war-rocket. I do not care. Der Power Planet will not be surrendered. It may be*

destroyed, but if so der war-rocket is destroyed also. And until we are blown to atoms, I order that der Dugald tubes be serfed, der Dugal beam kept focussed upon der Earth, and power sent to those who depend upon us for der safety of their lives and countries. That is all."

Old Ferdel's face faded from the screen as he clicked off the switch. And an hour later, out in the cold of interstellar space, Jimmy felt the same surge of loyalty that had come to him when he'd heard that message. Old Ferdel was a bulldog. He might not be clever, but he was game. He'd be killed before he'd give in to any man who tried to make him disobey his orders.

The guns went on. It was monotonous. The clankings of his own and other magnetic shoe soles upon the skin of the Planet. The curiously cushioned thud of the recoil when the gun went off. Then other clankings of magnetic soles. . . .

There was one chance in a million that a shell would strike its target. Then one chance in fifty thousand that if it struck, it would penetrate the war-rocket's outer skin at a spot where its explosion would disable essential machinery. The sole purpose of the shelling was to offer proof that the Planet was armed.

Throwing back his head, Jimmy saw tiny stars spring into being and instantly disappear. The shells, going off some forty miles away. And then, suddenly, he bethought himself of the torpedo-rockets. They were radio-controlled, and though radio communication has not yet penetrated the Heaviseide Layer on earth, two space-ships can radio to one another,—even though their range is curiously limited. The torpedo-rockets should work all right.

He saw a group of tiny flames sweeping out from the Planet. A torpedo-rocket starting off now. A second. A third. A fourth. Somewhere within the Planet, Horthy was working the controls, watching for his tiny torpedoes through a scanning-disk telescope, and planning to fling them on the war-rocket at forty miles' distance and blow it to atoms.

The little specks of bluish flame ascended and were lost to sight. One of them cut across the light-beam of the signaling telescopes. Its rocket-fumes were vivid,—horribly vivid and revealing in the path of the ten-million-candle-power beams. Then it vanished.

The guns fired on tediously. The Power Planet swung sedately in its orbit, and Jimmy felt the sting of the heating-elements in his vacuum-suit, and heard the flutter of his breathing-valves, and a faint, faint humming which was the miniature speaker within his helmet.

"Gunners cease firing," said the little instrument in a metallic voice. *"Not one shell has burst within half a mile of the target."*

Jimmy felt an irritated relief. At this range, shooting was foolishness. The only hope on the Power Planet was the torpedo-rockets. Four of them were on the way out. It was a pity the signalling searchlight beams had showed the fumes of one of them, but—

Then something went off. Four miles away, in mid-space, a yellow flame burst terrifyingly into existence. It seemed for an instant to rival the here invisible sun in brilliance. Then it went out.

There was no sound, but the Dugald beam flared brilliantly as the dissipating gases were jerked into its path. It tore molecules apart into atoms, and atoms into electrons, and electrons. . . . Jimmy wanted to shield his eyes.

"They've got torpedo-rockets too," he said unsteadily to himself.

Two miles away, another monstrous conflagration appeared in emptiness. The edge of the mile-round ball of flame licked the Power Planet's disk. Jimmy seemed to feel a slight concussion as of impact, of shock, upon the steel plates under his feet.

The Dugald beam was now a vast column of unbearable light, white-hot and blazing, from the particles of matter subjected to its enormous power. It reached out from the Power Planet's skin and stabbed toward the war-rocket, and past it, toward the Earth. . . .

Then a third explosion, no less huge, and no less terrible. The feeling of impact upon the floor beneath Jimmy's feet was definite. And then there was a fourth. . . . Jimmy was flung off his feet by a wave of gas. He went sliding and crashing across the Planet's plating. . . .

And as his magnetic soles caught on the metallic skin beneath them, and he staggered upright, he saw by the glare of the Dugald beam that a flying fragment,—a splinter, perhaps a particle the size of a grain of sand—had cracked the face-plate of the man next to him. The crack was enough. The face-plate burst outward into the vacuum of the void, with the pressure within the suit to complete the ruin. The baggy vacuum-suit went limp, went flabby, in the fraction of a second. But the man in it did not fall. Gravity was slight indeed, out here. And Jimmy's eyes could not be torn away from that man's face before he saw what happened to a man in utter emptiness with warm volatile blood in his veins and air within his lungs.

Jimmy barely heard the metallic order for all men in vacuum-suits to return within the Planet. He groped his way into the working-cell air-lock with the rest. He even helped carry in some of the equipment.

But when Jimmy got out of the air-lock and could open his own face-plate, he was horribly sick.

There were six of them at mess, again. Harlowe was gone, but the girl from Earth was with them. And Jimmy tried to eat, and could not, and Hauss ate stolidly with his eyes on his plate, and Renoir tried to talk lightly and found the girl not listening. Horthy's hands were trembling as he lifted food to his mouth. Little Skeptsy watched the girl and his face was curiously pinched and white.

"We're—still alive," said the girl, trying to be gay about it, and not succeeding at all well.

Horthy said miserably:

"It isn't my fault. I only used five kilowatts in my control-station for the torpedoes. Five-metre waves, beam projection. I thought it would be enough. . . ."

Jimmy said drearily:

"Miss Blair doesn't know what happened, Horthy."

Horthy stopped trying to eat.

"I—sent them at the war-rocket. I could watch them through a scanning telescope. They were under splendid control. I sent them in line, one after the other, until they were thirty miles out. I kept them in the Planet's shadow. Then I shot the first one straight at the rocket. Full acceleration,—and torpedo-rockets have a maximum acceleration of eight, which would kill a man. I sent that first one at the war-rocket, and suddenly it seemed to jam. A steering-tube went on and it began to go around in circles. I worked the controls, but it didn't respond. I tried the second. It almost hit the rocket, but slithered aside at the last minute and went past. I tried to bring it back. It didn't come. The third, and fourth. . . . Every one of them went bad at the last minute and started going in circles. I swore, and ordered some more got ready. And then I saw my four coming back. . . ."

Sweat stood out on his neck.

"They must have used a fifty-watt control on them. Took them away from me in mid-flight. When they got near us, I managed to make one detonate. But I was using a beam. I thought it was all up with the Planet. They set off the other three when they chose. They were out of range of my beam."

Hauss stopped eating, looked up, and said heavily:

"I am going to have a radio screen ready tomorrow, Horthy. Maybe that will do. We are taking a Dugald tube from the reserve bank and I'm fitting up a swivel projector. Maybe that will do the work we need. It will be finished tomorrow."

Renoir saw a chance to talk effectively. He seized it.

"The radio screen," he said with an effect of genial precision, "is not exactly a screen, Miss Blair. It is actually a Dugald beam, a

beam of extremely short waves which projects power in a straight line. The beam is, say, one yard across. It will cut a war-rocket in half if it sweeps across it while carrying, say, twenty thousand horsepower. Now, if we have to protect a city against aircraft at a height of—say—five miles, the matter is simple. We imagine a half-globe, divide it into squares each the size of the smallest practical air-craft, and operate the beam so that each of those squares is cut through by the beam every thirty seconds.

To cut the life of a rocket to a maximum of thirty minutes at two hundred miles calls for nearly thirty beams and something like three million horsepower. And in thirty minutes a rocket can do a great deal of harm, especially if it is radio-controlled and is composed of practically nothing but a case, its fuel, and its explosives. It can, for instance, try to blow up the radio screen projectors."

The girl said unsteadily:

"But here—"

"Ah, here," said Renoir comfortably, "we have all the power of the world. We are delivering seventeen hundred million horsepower—"

"Nineteen hundred million," said Skepsky, unsmiling. "It has gone up again."

"Nineteen hundred million horsepower!" Renoir accepted the correction. "With a Dugald beam mounted on a swivel we can take the merest trifle, a *soupçon*, an infinitesimal half-mission horsepower, and vaporize the war-rocket which has had the bad taste to make you lose your appetite, Miss Blair. And we will do it!"

"Except," said Skepsky, "that we have just four hours in which to surrender. A message came from the war-rocket. And it will take twenty-four to build the radio screen."

Jimmy said suddenly:

"Horthy! Those rockets!—Those torpedo-rockets! Would they smash that war-rocket if they were gotten to it in spite of their radio?"

Horthy shrugged drearily.

"How do I know? They shook the Planet. But we can't get them there. They've got a control-plant that will enable them to take the things away from us."

Jimmy opened his mouth to speak. A gong clanged fiercely. The G. C. speaker said in Ferdel's voice, savage and bull-like.

"Gentlemen! Der war-rocket has landed a party in *vacuum-snits* on der Planet. Section-commanders may accept volunteers to go out on der skin and kill them. Go ahead!"

It clicked off. The five junior lieutenants stared at one another. Jimmy's eyes began to burn. He smiled a little, grimly.

"Somebody's got to stay with Miss Blair," he said easily. "Hauss, you'd better stay because you've got to work on the screen."

"I have to report back," said Hauss. "And I am working in one of the tube-rooms. Miss Blair must not come there. It is dangerous."

"Skeptsy," said Jimmy. "You'll stay with Miss Blair. If necessity comes and she doesn't recognize it, make her close her face-plate."

"Yes," said little Skeptsy.

Jimmy nodded to the girl, still smiling, and strode toward the lifts. Renoir made her a bow. Horthy stood up and walked heavily away. Hauss ate on, stolidly.

"What—what can men do, landed on the skin of the Planet?" asked the girl faintly. She was looking at the lift-door, just closing on Jimmy Cardigan.

"They will crack the ports," said Skeptsy tonelessly, "to let the air out of the Planet, so we will suffocate. But the ports are arranged with metal doors inside. The Commander will have them swung in place at once. When they find that out they will probably use explosives, to tear great gaps in the plating."

The girl glanced momentarily at a port. It was already closed by a metal door that had swung soundlessly into place. She looked back at the lift that was taking Jimmy Cardigan aloft.

"And then—"

"We will use vacuum-suits," said Skeptsy; "and go through an air-lock into one of the sub-stations that has not yet been cracked."

"And—"

"Then," said Skeptsy, looking at her with queerly unhappy eyes, "when that is cracked, we will go on to another. There are more than sixty."

His face was pinched, was bleak. He was peculiarly unlike the little Skeptsy who flew lightly about the central observatory, blandly observing that he was practicing at being an angel.

The lift had left seconds before, bearing Jimmy toward one of the inner levels. The girl tore her eyes away from it.

"But—"

"There will come a time," said Skeptsy, his voice oddly high-pitched, "when there is only one sub-sector left on the Planet. We cannot supply the earth with Power. Then the Commander will blow the whole Planet to bits with the rocket-fuel the war-rocket needs to get back to earth."

"And we—"

"Die," said Skeptsy.

He clasped his hands and unclasped them. Hauss, eating stolidly, pushed back his plate and rose.

"I am going back to work on the screen," he said heavily. "Skept-sky makes the matter sound too horrible, Miss Blair. We will not die so slowly. The rocket-commander offered to spare our lives if we surrendered in four hours. There are only three and a quarter left. He will send torpedo-rockets to blow us up when he is sure he cannot capture the Planet."

"But you're working on the screen. . . ."

"They are my orders," said Hauss. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "We all obey orders, on the Planet and on the war-rocket too. We act as soldiers. It happens that we are ordered to be killed. That is all."

He went soberly over to the lift that would take him to his level. The door closed on him. He shot upward and vanished.

It was very quiet in the mess-room. The ports were closed, now, by the metal doors within them. Gravity was normal here, and the place seemed a trifle prison-like, to be sure, but extremely matter-of-fact. The metal walls were painted white, and the electric lights glowed brightly, and the metal furniture was solid. . . . It seemed exactly like a rather exotic room on Earth; a room without windows. It was extremely difficult to imagine it as forty-odd million miles out in space.

Little Skeptsky paced up and down the room. The girl sat stiffly in her seat, listening. There was the humming of the ventilating system. There was the sound of little Skeptsky's footsteps. Otherwise there was a vast, an enormous silence. . . .

"It is natural," said little Skeptsky suddenly,—and his voice was queerly hoarse and strained—"it is natural enough for us to fall in love with you, Miss Blair. We cannot help it. But why have you fallen in love with Jimmy Cardigan?"

The girl started. She stared at Skeptsky. And he was a small man, and his face was white and pinched, and he looked at her with eyes that were unutterably sad and unutterably rebellious.

"Why is it?" he demanded fiercely. "Tell me! We die in three hours. Why shouldn't I be myself? Why shouldn't I be natural? I am a man. You are a woman. I love you!"

He stopped, and said with a forced dispassionateness:

"I can explain the phenomenon perfectly. We have seen no woman for months,—for years. So Renoir dreams of you. I heard him babbling. Horthy writes poetry about you. And Hauss. . . . All of us are fools, and our exquisite sensations are merely the sublimated symptoms of a biological urge. I know that, and I do not believe it."

The girl regarded him absently. Presently her eyes strayed away. Her whole soul was lost in listening; in listening for sounds of battle between men in clumsy vacuum-suits in the cold of interstellar

space, where a pin-prick meant death. It would be very horrible, that battle in the blackness on the smooth and slippery Power Planet's skin. It would be horrible to fight there with a foothold formed only by the grip of magnets upon steel, where men had no weight, but only strength, and the slow rotation of the vast disk thrust everyone gently but persistently toward the outer edge, toward the unbelievable emptiness of space.

But here all was incredibly normal. The only sound was the humming of the ventilation system. The Power Planet swam in space with a vast deliberation, with a vast impersonality. And within a brightly lighted cell inside, a woman listened with her whole soul for sounds of battle outside, and upon a warm earth millions of miles away there were men who waited in a cold despair for the ceasing of the power-beam. And that would mean destruction to them and all their lives had gone for.

Little Skeptsy wrung his hands.

"Jimmy Cardigan," he said, and the girl's eyes turned quickly to him. He winced. "No other two words that I could say," he told her hoarsely, "would have made you hear me! Now listen! I hate Jimmy Cardigan from the bottom of my soul! You love him. But his brain is slow, and mine is quick, and I know he has begun to think a thought which will save the earth."

The girl's eyes were wide.

"What is he going to do?"

"I know!" said Skeptsy bitterly. "He began to say it. He asked Horthy if a torpedo would destroy the war-rocket if it could be gotten to it in spite of the failure of radio-control. He is going to ride a torpedo-rocket in a vacuum-suit, out to where the war-rocket rides, and explode it against the damned thing's hull. He will blow it to bits."

The girl's eyes shone.

"And he," said Skeptsy, "will be blown to bits with it." The girl paled.

"Are you—sure?"

Skeptsy laughed.

"He will be the hero of Earth for ages to come. Because before another rocket can get here, Hauss will have built a screen and we can put a hundred million horsepower into it, if need be: Jimmy will have won us nine days' respite, and he will have saved the world from the nation which would destroy it with us. Jimmy will be the hero of ages,—and he knows it! But he will be blown to bits! And he won't mind! Your loving him won't matter against that!"

The girl shivered.

"Couldn't—someone—"

Skeptsy laughed again.

"I could! What am I bid for my suicide, Miss Blair? What am I bid for Jimmy Cardigan's life? He will take that torpedo-rocket out so his name will live for ages. So could I. But I would be stealing the thought from his brain and the glory from the future. It would be highly dishonorable to steal his opportunity for a magnificent suicide. What am I bid for scoundrelism?"

The girl was very pale.

"What—do you want?"

Skeptsy laughed once more. But his eyes were not amused. They looked—very peculiarly indeed—as if he were filled with bitterness as he smilingly named his price. And that bitterness deepened as the girl breathed a sigh of passionate relief.

There is not, ordinarily, any morgue upon the Power Planet, but after the fighting on the darkside plating one had to be improvised. There were six vacuum-suits laid on the floor of an empty storageroom. Six vacuum-suits, not six men. The suits were peculiarly collapsed. Two of them were of the type used on the Power Planet. Four were strange.

Jimmy Cardigan opened the door and pointed inside.

"Here, Doctor."

He did not look at the objects on the floor. No one should have had to look at the objects on the floor. A deep-sea fish, when dredged up from the pressures of the ocean's depths, will burst when it reaches the surface. But its blood does not burst into steam from the release of pressure. A man in a vacuum-suit which has been punctured in combat is not so fortunate.

The Chief Surgeon of the Power Planet stepped inside the storeroom. He steeled himself, looked down, and gagged. Then he bent over.

There were footsteps outside, the clanking, metallic noise of magnetic-soled shoes. The white-haired young commander of the mail-rocket stopped at the door.

The Chief Surgeon was at work, apparently sick to his very soul. The rocket-commander looked in the partly opened door.

"What are they, Doctor?"

"I don't know, yet," said the surgeon grimly.

Jimmy's voice came in.

"Two of them are our men. Junior Lieutenant Harlowe was one. He was caught by one of those devils. They had a clever trick. Somebody had evidently figured out our gravitation for them—the actual attraction of the Planet's mass, that is. Anybody who could be flung away at ten feet per second would never come back. So

they didn't try killing, just throwing our men away. We lost several that way, poor devils! They're still alive, no doubt, watching the Planet go farther and farther away from them. Their tanks hold air for six hours, but we can't do a thing to save them."

The rocket-commander lit a cigarette.

"Well?"

"Oh, Harlowe was caught. One of them had him. Two more of the enemy came to help their man and Harlowe deliberately crashed his face-plate against the other man's. Both face-plates cracked. Both men died."

The Chief Surgeon made an indistinguishable sound, inside the store-room.

"Need any help?" asked the rocket-commander coolly.

Jimmy shuddered. He'd helped bring these bodies in. He didn't want to help.

"It'll do," said the Chief Surgeon grimly.

"I'm in a hurry," said the rocket-commander crisply. "I'm leaving in the mail-rocket as soon as you know."

Jimmy said confidently:

"I suggest, sir, that you wait a little. I've got an idea that I hadn't time to put up to the Commander. . . ."

"What?"

"The war-rocket can take our torpedo-rockets away from us in flight, while they're radio-controlled. But we can fix one with manual control, I'll put on a vacuum-suit, and steer it. Their radio control can't affect that, and they can't have power enough to put a screen out."

"You'd be blown to bits," said the rocket-commander drily.

"Yes, sir," said Jimmy, "but so will the war-rocket."

"You're too late," said the mail-rocket commander more drily still. "They're fixing two rockets for somebody else. A little fellow named Skeptsy. He says he's had practice, flying about the observation-room."

There was a clanking sound inside the store-room. It was the sound of a vacuum-suit helmet being laid on the steel floor.

"The devil!" said Jimmy Cardigan.

"I'm going to use him as a diversion," said the rocket-commander. "He may or may not succeed. But I'm starting off in the mail-rocket. That torpedo-control outfit that was tried some hours back is being fitted on my ships. I dive out of the reception-cell, get on the sun-side of the Planet, and try to put ten or twelve thousand miles between me and the war-rocket before they realize it. If their torpedoes don't catch me before that time, the five-kilowatt control-set will take control of them. I'll make for Earth. And when I'm

within telescopic sight I'll signal with my rocket-fumes what the Chief Surgeon is going to tell me. By the time I land, the war will be over. Whatever nation has been making war will have been destroyed."

Jimmy's eyes gleamed. There were noises within the store-room. The Chief Surgeon came out, looking white and sick. He said one word, the name of a nationality.

"You're sure?"

"All of them are, except the two in our type of vacuum-suits. I'll stake my reputation on it."

The mail-rocket commander smiled without any amusement at all.

"That's not the stake. The stake is a good many million lives. I leave in five minutes to arrange for the execution of all their compatriots."

He went briskly off along the corridor. Jimmy hesitated, and went after him.

A single electric bulb illuminated the work-cell. It was a high candle power bulb; all of a thousand candle-power, set behind a diffuser of heavy glass. And as the work-cell was no more than ten feet across, just big enough to serve as air-lock for a working-party going to the Planet's outer skin, the light was blinding. At one side was the circular door that opened upon empty space. There was dense frost about the rounded sill. And the work-cell was cold. The breaths of those within it glittered in the frosty air.

Skeptsy was very pale indeed in the glaring light. There were two torpedo-rockets lying on the floor, buckled together with one arranged for possible slipping. Skeptsy would strap himself to the other. His face looked pinched and peaked, staring out of the opened vacuum-suit helmet.

"I hope—*Gott! I hope!*—that you get der tamned thing with der loose rocket," growled old Ferdel. "Try it first, Skeptsy."

Skeptsy swallowed.

"I will, sir."

The commander of the mail-rocket shook hands crisply.

"Good luck," he said drily, "I start out when your rocket goes off. I won't see you again."

Skeptsy tried to grin. The effect was ghastly.

"No, sir," he said, and swallowed, "you won't."

The girl from Earth was there, too. She was pale as death, regarding Skeptsy with queerly uneasy eyes. Skeptsy turned to Jimmy Cardigan.

"I hear you thought of this trick too," he said in a rather high-pitched voice. "Did you, Jimmy?"

"Not as soon as you did," admitted Jimmy. "If you flop, Skeptsky, I have next try at it. Horthy's fixing up manual controls on a couple more torpedos."

Skeptsky grinned, with a side-glance at the girl.

"I'm going to do you out of the chance, Jimmy. And—Miss Blair——"

She offered her hand, unconsciously shrinking back a little. She moistened her lips, as if frightened. She looked at Jimmy, and back at Skeptsky.

"I believe," said Skeptsky, his eyes very bright and bitter, "that it is customary——"

The girl looked again at Jimmy, and back at Skeptsky.

"I am going out to be killed," said Skeptsky very politely. "Might I ask you, Miss Blair, to live up to the dramatic possibilities of the situation? Would you——"

The girl stammered; "I—I—. Y-yes. . . ."

"I speak of a kiss," said Skeptsky. "It is customary for heroes to go forth to battle with encouragement. . . ."

The girl flushed horribly. Skeptsky advanced upon her. She looked miserably at Jimmy. Skeptsky kissed her. She was utterly unresponsive; utterly reluctant.

"After all," said Skeptsky blandly, "it is a small price to pay." But his voice broke. "Get out of here!" he cried in a high-pitched falsetto. "Get out of here, all of you!"

He flung himself down on the rocket he was to ride and closed the face-plate of his vacuum-suit. Old Ferdel boomed:

"Eferybody oudt! Good luck, Skeptsky!"

He saluted Skeptsky stiffly, with a fine air of formality. Jimmy lifted his hand, smiling wily. The girl bit her lips and stumbled out of the little cell without looking at Skeptsky again. The commander of the mail-rocket nodded and was gone. The sliding door closed. Skeptsky sobbed, inside his helmet. To pay one's life for a kiss, and have that payment begrudged. . . .

The light in the work-cell went out. It was dark with the darkness of the abyss. There was a hissing sound, and Skeptsky's vacuum-suit swelled. The hairs at the back of his neck crawled, and he sobbed again. Then, with a clanking noise that was communicated through the metal of the floor and the torpedo-rockets, the outer door of the work-cell opened. Skeptsky could see innumerable stars against a background of deepest black. He could even see one cold bright glittering speck that hung very near the Power Planet.

His fingers, inside their heated gloves, were stiff. But he pressed the little levers that would start the propulsion-tubes. The two rockets stirred. He thrust the levers down farther. The two torpedos

moved smoothly toward the circular open door. Weight here, near the center of the Power Planet's disk, was negligible. The rockets went easily out the opening.

Skeptsy saw the vast black area of the Planet behind him. He gave the torpedo-rockets more power. They shot ahead, and the straps that bound him to one of them pressed tightly against his back. The acceleration rose to normal; to twice-normal. Little Skeptsy's brain reeled for a moment at the suddenness of it. Then he ground his teeth. He looked back. He could see the whole disk of the Planet, huge behind him. He was probably a mile from its surface.

"She—didn't even want to kiss me," said little Skeptsy bitterly.

The rockets roared on. They made a sound that was communicated to him by his vacuum-suit. Presently he looked back again. The Power Planet was a black hole in the universe of unwinking specks of light. Clinging to a torpedo-rocket not more than ten feet from tip to propulsion-tubes, with another bumping against it irregularly, little Skeptsy reached a point fully twenty miles from the Power Planet's disk. Forty millions of miles from Earth, which shone bright and warm where the power beam stabbed across infinity. The Power Planet was the size of a penny. The rocket was a silvery needle.

Little Skeptsy was alone among the stars. He ground his teeth and gave the torpedo more power still.

The Planet Commander sat down and put the thigh-grips in place over his fat legs. A call-light glowed and he swung the disk and microphone before him.

"What der teufel?" he demanded.

The face of the mail-rocket commander appeared on the tiny screen.

"The mail-rocket is ready to take off, sir," he said formally. "I thought it wise to be in communication with you. Will you signal me, sir, when Lieutenant Skeptsy has created a diversion which will benefit me?"

"Yes," grunted old Ferdel. "Stay on der wire."

Jimmy was working the controls of the main darkside telescope, already plugged in to the Planet Commander's office. He leaned back from the eyepieces, plugged in the projector, and a star-field came into being on the wall-screen.

"There you are, sir," he said formally.

The girl from earth was also in the Planet Commander's office. She had followed Jimmy, as her official guide. Now she sat down with the awkwardness of a person new from earth in the center of

the Power Planet. Her eyes fastened upon Jimmy, and then turned toward the star-field.

"Here's the war-rocket, sir," said Jimmy.

He turned up the magnification a trifle. A bright speck enlarged and elongated. He sent the magnification away up; until the whole screen was filled with the warship of space. It was all a frosty silver which glittered brilliantly in the naked sunlight. High-lights were blinding. Shadows were infinitely black. It lay quartering toward the Power Planet, and they could look some little way into the huge nozzles of its propelling rocket-tubes, and they could see the bulbous-jointed side tubes and braking-rockets. There were symbols painted on its sides, but they were broken up and hidden by the folded side-tubes. It was oddly beautiful as the projector threw it on the Planet Commander's screen, but it is very deadly indeed.

Old Ferdel grunted.

"Where is Skeptsky?"

The war-rocket seemed to dwindle as Jimmy turned the magnification down. A star-field grew behind and all about it as the field of vision widened.

The three of them watched. Jimmy with a keen, almost envious intentness. Old Ferdel with the grim attentiveness of a man whose life depends on what he is about to see, but who is doggedly determined to face his fate without yielding an inch to any emotion whatever. The girl looked from the screen to Jimmy's face and back again.

There was tense silence. The rocket, hanging free in space, floating in the beginning of an orbit just forty miles outside that of the Power Planet. The unwinking, unfriendly, glittering stars. And emptiness.

Jimmy made a little exclamation.

"Look there, sir!"

He pointed. Against the stars there was appearing a misty column of light. Little Skeptsky's torpedo-rockets were well out from the Power Planet now, but keeping within the ten-mile shadow. Yet their exhaust-gases, torn by the utter emptiness of space, were spreading into the Dugald beam. And that was glowing vividly as it tore the molecules into atoms, and the atoms into electrons, and beat at even those ultimate particles of matter.

"He's going out!" said Jimmy.

Silence again. The long column of misty light grew longer. Twenty miles. Thirty miles. . . .

"They are trying der radio controls on der torpedos," said old Ferdel grimly. "They do not understand why they cannot take control of der rockets this time, der same as last."

The voice of the mail-rocket commander came suddenly from the disk on which his image remained.

"Sir, hadn't I better have the reception-cell opened?"

Ferdel grunted. "Wait!"

Jimmy's eyes were fixed upon the screen. But there was nothing to be seen save a myriad stars, and the glittering war-craft floating motionless in space, and a long straight column of misty light which was the Dugald beam leaping forty millions of miles toward Earth.

Then Jimmy exclaimed suddenly.

A speck had darted suddenly into sight. An arrow-shaped dart of pinkish vapor. It sprang into being as it left the Planet's shadow. One instant it was not. The next, it was darting madly toward the war-rocket. A little plume of pinkish vapor which looked like flame in the sunlight. On it sped, and on. . . .

Suddenly it divided in half. One little wisp of flame shot upward on the screen. The other kept on, straight for the war-vessel. Straight. . . . Then a side-tube on the war-rocket moved with panic-stricken haste. Before it was in position a cloud of gas was pouring from it. The little flame darted on, into the five-mile jet of rocket-gas. . . .

And suddenly that jet cut off. But the tinier flame, the exhaust of the freed torpedo-rocket, went on. It went on madly, fiercely, its course changed, on and on through space. . . . It would travel on with increasing speed until its fuel was exhausted. Then it would continue to speed madly on through emptiness forever.

Old Ferdel mopped a sweat-bedewed brow.

"It is der end," he said savagely. "Skeptsy is bound to fail. Perhaps with a dozen folunteers one of them would get to der *verdammt* thing. But we haff not time. It is no use to look."

Jimmy said quietly:

"Two more rockets are nearly ready, sir, and I have next chance. I'm going to watch their tactics."

The little torpedo on which Skeptsy rode appeared again. It came streaking back from beyond the war-rocket in a sharp, swift dash. A tube raised from the war-rocket's side. Vapor poured out in colossal volume. The little torpedo shot clear. It made another dash, and another. . . . Each time a huge tube blasted it from its course.

Watching it so intently, the three were unconscious of the effect of those repelling jets of gas. Little Skeptsy was flinging his mount madly about in space. Ten feet long, no more, with a clumsy figure in a corpulent vacuum-suit strapped to it, the torpedo was the barest possible speck. Yet it dashed at the huge war-craft as a midget might rush at a giant. Every time it was brushed away. Every time it was

flung aside. Yet it returned to the attack again and again and again. . . .

Jimmy's hands were shaking as he turned the controlling-knobs to keep the weird battle upon the vision-screen. It was moving away from the center of the telescope's field. The jets which thrust Skept-sky aside were moving the war-ship. And suddenly Jimmy saw something with an extraordinary lucidity. He gasped;

"By God, he's going to make it! He's going to——"

Little Skeptsky was apparently throwing away his life and all chance of success together. He came fiercely, in a straight line, squarely for the base of the war-rocket. . . .

"Der fool!" snapped old Ferdel. "Der propulsion-tubes will burn him to a crisp. . . ."

Vapor shot out of those propulsion-tubes. Ten, twenty miles of space was filled with the gigantic plumes of vapor. Skeptsky shot straight into them.

"By God!" panted Jimmy, "He's done it! *He's done it!*"

There was a vivid flare of light. A colossal globe of pure flame sprang into being out there in space, midway among the stars. It held for the fraction of a second before the rocket-exhaust beat it out of existence.

And then, suddenly, the Dugald beam glowed as brightly as the sun itself.

"He made 'em——" panted Jimmy, "he made 'em—start themselves going toward—the Beam! At the—last minute he—made 'em put the propulsion-jets on full force—to destroy him! They did! But—with the force of his explosion acting on the—jets, they got flung ahead! They can't stop!"

The war-rocket was invisible now. It was in the shadow of the Power Planet. It was moving toward the Dugald beam. And that beam was glowing with a brilliance such as even the sun that men look upon had never shown. Two great braking-tubes were flinging terrific clouds of gas into it, trying to check the velocity Skept-sky had made the rocket-pilot give to his ship himself. And the spot of light grew smaller and more intense, proving the continued approach of the war-rocket. . . . It dwindled to a speck of unthinkable brightness. And then——

The screen in the Planet Commander's office seemed to turn to flame. Stars and planets—all the universe was blotted out. Such a blaze of light spurted from the screen that the three who looked at it involuntarily shut their eyes. Vapor in the Dugald beam had made a brilliance like that of the sun. When the beam tore a five-hundred-foot war-rocket down into its constituent electrons. . . .

When the three in the Planet Commander's cabin could look again,

there was the smell of scorched paint in the air. The painted screen was flaking off curled-up scraps of pigment. And the projector was dark and dead.

"It burned out der telescope," said old Ferdel hoarsely. "Der going of der rocket—*Ach, Gott!*"

His voice was strange, was incredible, after the thing they had witnessed. The girl gasped. Her face was drained of blood. Jimmy caught her in his arms as her eyes went blank. And Jimmy was delirious with excitement, with triumph, with all the uncontrollable emotions that come to men in the hour of victory. He kissed her.

"Nothing to worry about! You hear?" he gasped in her ear. He kissed her again. "The rocket's destroyed! The world's safe! You're safe——"

She clung to him, shuddering. And Old Ferdel saw the two of them and his mouth dropped open. When one is Planet Commander of the Power Planet, and has not seen earth or a woman for six years on end, he is likely to forget the spontaneous demonstrations of affection that take place everywhere after victories.

But old Ferdel was not likely to forget some other matter. The probable effect of the presence of this girl upon the Power Planet's crew during the next six months, the only woman among some nine hundred men.

The voice of the mail-rocket commander came from the little speaker-disk.

"Sir! Is it possible for me to start now? Hasn't Lieutenant Skept-sky made contact with the enemy as yet?"

Old Ferdel turned from his gaping survey of Jimmy Cardigan and the girl from earth in each other's arms.

"Der defill!" he snapped. "Of course he made contact! He destroyed der *verdammt thing!* But I forbid you to leave! You will wait five minutes until I put two passengers on board to be taken back to Earth with you. I cannot haff them on der Planet!"

Four million miles from Earth, the mail-rocket changed its course. Telescopes were watching it. War-rockets would come out to defend it and escort it safely in. Berlin had been bombed in its absence, and Constantinople and Odessa were in ruins. Calcutta was a tumbled heap of flame-licked earth. But the Humphries-Dugald Finder had been designed and built and tested during the past three days. It was already in operation in most of the cities left upon earth. Thousands of little five-horsepower Dugald beams searched the sky above those cities, now. And when one of them cut across a war-rocket, even five hundred miles aloft, it did no damage, but it gave an automatic signal, and the great hundred-thousand-horsepower beams were fo-

cussed instantly on the spot. Over twenty war-rockets had already been spotted and destroyed, and the lone Power Planet was still safe upon its lonely orbit to provide the power for those beams. . . .

On the mail-rocket, they knew nothing of all that. The slender silver cylinder changed its course. The plume of exhaust-gas ceased. Then it began again, and in dots and dashes ten and twenty miles long, the commander wrote against a background of infinitely tiny stars his message of the nationality of those who had been sent in the war-rocket to work the doom of earth. The telescopes upon earth read it, very grimly and very carefully.

The war was won, of course. With the new finders for the radio screens, cities were now invulnerable—as long as the Power Planet swam in space. And by now the Power Planet itself would be invulnerable with screens that would vaporize any war-craft five thousand miles away. The world was safe. And with the enemy known. . . .

But the enemy had read that message too. And unconditional surrender had been made before even the first of the vast machines of destruction from the rest of the world had set out on their mission.

On earth all things were going well, and four million miles from earth, Jimmy Cardigan felt that all was perfect too, though he was thinking less of earth than of a future which quite definitely represented Heaven. The mail-rocket was a week out from the Power Planet, and in a week one can fall devastatingly in love with a girl even though she is the daughter of the President of the United States. And when she loves you too. . . .

They watched the continents float past them as the rocket settled down toward the atmospheric envelope of earth, still hundreds of thousands of miles away.

"Skeptsy will be the hero of earth for ages," said Jimmy. "I never thought he had the nerve to do a thing like that."

"You thought of it first," said a soft, adoring voice at his ear. "You know you did! If you don't, I do!"

Jimmy shook his head.

"Skeptsy——"

"Please," said the soft voice. "Don't think of Skeptsy! I love you!"

So Jimmy obediently stopped thinking of Skeptsy.

To our way of thinking, August Derleth is one of the outstanding American masters of the ghost story. He is also one of our nation's leading regional writers. Put these talents together and you have a tale of a baneful old house with an uneasy architecture and a grimly compelling influence all its own. . . .

The Shuttered House

by August Derleth

PETER JEPSON had made up his mind about it almost at first sight. The house was attractive, the dark green of shutters tightly closed over all its windows, and the vivid white of its brick walls lending an air of dubious enchantment to it. There was a wide piazza which could not be seen from the street because of the old red-brick garden wall; this, Jepson could not help regarding as an asset, for he knew that Carlotta disliked being spied upon by curious villagers, and he himself did not care to be the focus of the certain attention which would fall to him once it was generally learned that he was a composer by profession.

Then, too, there was about the house a strangely silent air, broken only by vague chirps from the depths of the foliage, and suffused at this time of the year with the sweet, heavy odor of lilacs, a riot of lavender blossom at the foot of the garden. There were also a great many flowers growing wild in the lawn and amidst the garden's weeds, and the rambling trees and flowering shrubs seemed to have grown very well without care.

The agent spoke suddenly, breaking Jepson's scrutiny. "Old Josiah Brendon built the house," he said with the air of launching into a tale. "A miser—died counting his gold, they say. His wife was just as bad in another way—hated everybody, never went out; for that matter, there are women like her in Sac Prairie today. But their son, Mark, and his wife, Elva, were the worst. No doubt about that. I used to know Mark, too; nice fellow. I never did understand what got into him. But no one knows exactly what makes a madman.

"I remember when they took Elva away to the asylum, and when they brought her back for burial. I guess that was what finally upset

Mark. Got him right. He lived here alone, then, and he used to come out at night and beat at the window-shutters and tear at the garden wall until his fingers bled. In the end, they had to take him away, too."

He stopped musingly, pursing his lips and narrowing his eyes reflectively, and added, "They brought him back alive, though—white-haired and looking terribly old. He didn't go back to this house—went to one of the hotels and took rooms there. Wouldn't go near this place. I saw him not long before he died last year and I got the agency."

"Interesting," commented Jepson shortly. "And no one has lived here since?"

"Well, ah, yes," murmured the agent apologetically. "A crusty bachelor lived here for about a week. You could hardly call that occupying the house. He got queer notions."

"Notions?" echoed Jepson absently.

Mr. Burcher nodded vigorously. "Had the idea there was someone trying to get into him. Never heard the like." He paused, adding thoughtfully, "I was glad to have him out of the house."

Jepson eyed the French windows and the weed-grown garden and the high brick wall shutting out the street. He smiled to himself. "Good," he said. "I'll take the house for the summer, at least."

Burcher smiled enthusiastically. "Will there be just you, Mr. Jepson?" he asked.

"Oh, no. My invalid sister will move in with me," Jepson replied. "And of course, there'll be a cook, a maid, and a nurse for Carlotta."

Together they went from the house.

Peter Jepson and his sister moved into the house on the first of June.

Miss Carlotta, an angular and unprepossessing woman who had spent a decade coddling her nerves, had at first been pleased with her brother's selection. However, he had not been so sanguine as to hope that she would long be content, though he had not thought she would complain so soon. After a day in the house, she pointed out that it felt rather damp. He brushed this suggestion firmly away.

"And then, too, Peter," she went on, "the air's funny in the house."

This he chose to disregard entirely. He was at the moment deep in the score of Leo Sowerby's *Prairie*, and his enthusiasm for it had been rapidly mounting. "This is a great work, Carlotta," he said in an attempt to divert her mind from complaint. "The critics can say all they want about the scarcity of really good Midwest composers, but I tell you that Sowerby——" Happening to look up at this mo-

ment, he discovered his sister staring through the French windows of his study into the garden.

At the same moment she caught his glance, and without flicker of her eyes, she whispered harshly, "There's a strange man out there!"

Startled, he turned. The afternoon was cloudy with a hint of rain, and the garden, still in the motionless air of the sultry day, was heavily shadowed by the close-pressing clouds and the low-hanging trees. Near the lilac bushes at the far end there seemed indeed to be a figure, that of a rather bent man of medium size, who was apparently engaged in work at the base of the wall. Jepson was about to comment, when the clouds broke, sunlight flooded the garden, and the figure was gone.

He was surprised. "How strange!" he murmured presently. He had an unaccountable feeling of relief that the figure was gone. "There's something that makes that shadow, Carlotta," he said, turning to his sister.

Carlotta was still staring out at the wall.

"It's gone, my dear," he said.

She opened her lips twice to speak, then breathlessly closed them again. Then she said quietly, "No. It's still there. It's moved over about two yards, just behind the bush on the left. I can still see it. I—I don't think it's a shadow."

The composer turned and looked toward the wall, but after a half-minute of careful scrutiny, he shook his head. "Nonsense," he said. "There's nothing there."

Since she continued to stare into the garden, he rose abruptly before cutting off her sight. "Look here, Carlotta," he said, his voice edged with sternness, "you feed your imagination too much."

For a moment her eyes seemed not to see him; then they came slowly back to focus. She smiled, and with a little nod, said, "Perhaps so. But that shadow's still there."

They stood challenging each other with their eyes for a few moments. Then abruptly she turned and went from the room, and after a momentary hesitation Jepson sat down again, looked fleetingly into the garden, and returned to the score he had been studying, thinking how very much smoother things would be if Carlotta could be persuaded to tire of being an invalid.

Four days passed, during which Jepson had noticed about his sister a vague uneasiness which disturbed him. It was unusual for Carlotta to betray even the slightest emotion. For a moment he had hoped the life of an invalid had begun to pall, but he knew his sister too well to entertain any illusions on that score.

Carlotta suddenly unburdened her mind at luncheon one day,

when, without unusual asperity, she cut her brother off as he began a discussion of his work.

"I think I'd like to live somewhere else," she said abruptly.

"My dear!" he said firmly.

"I think it's the house," continued Carlotta. "It upsets me—it almost frightens me."

He looked at her a moment as if he had not heard aright. Then he spoke. "Nonsense. What you need, Carlotta, is some good fresh air, and exercise."

"Well, I don't know," she replied quickly. "Maybe I do, but I don't think so. I'm fitted for a sedentary life, Peter, and I never before needed air and exercise. No, it's the house, I'm sure, and that's odd, come to think of it."

"Very," agreed Jepson dryly. He grunted ungraciously and then, having finished his meal, excused himself and left his sister to stare earnestly at the crumbling, vine-grown bricks of the garden wall discernible through the trees.

But the memory of Carlotta's words bothered him, and to himself he was forced to admit that he had not slept as well as he might have. Carlotta had probably been affected the same way. He considered this, until finally he rose and began to walk about the old house, studying it as he went. There was nothing damp about it, he decided, remembering Carlotta's original complaint. It grew upon him as he went along that the atmosphere was rather uncannily close, but there was nothing unusual about that in a house which had been kept closed as long as this one had been. Despite the closeness of it, the atmosphere was pleasant and, after a few minutes, he returned to his work, chafing at the time he had lost on his sister's fancies.

On the following day Carlotta again insinuated her fancies into the conversation at table.

"Well," said Jepson, resigned at last, "just what is it you feel?"

Carlotta looked at him unsteadily, her high forehead making her large brown eyes look larger. She leaned forward over the table and said softly, "I always have a horrible feeling that we're not alone, that there are others here, others we can feel and sometimes see, like the other day in the garden. And they're trying to get in—I can feel it, especially in the night."

For a moment Jepson regarded her in amazement. "Others here—trying to get in?" he repeated in astonishment. Then, "Carlotta, I think you're ill."

Carlotta shook her head; her voice rose. "I can feel them trying to get at us, I can feel them. I don't know what they want, but I'm afraid, Peter, I'm really afraid. At night I wake up, and I'm in deadly

terror—because I think someone has closed the shutters, and I'm shut in with them. And then I've a horror of that garden wall, ever since I saw the man there. I don't want to stay here any longer, Peter. I don't feel like myself any more. Sometimes I feel like another person. Yesterday I wanted to call you *Mark*—it was on the tip of my tongue, and I thought, how could you be *Mark*? You're Peter; I never knew anyone named Mark. That's why I want to go away."

For a breathless instant Jepson's astonishment held him speechless. Then, feeling the intensity of her voice and fearing for her sanity, he leaned over suddenly and began to pat her gently on her arm. "I'll do what I can, my dear," he promised, restraining his amazement with difficulty.

"That's good," said Carlotta, and resumed her meal as if nothing out of the ordinary had taken place.

He watched her narrowly for a short time; then he, too, gave his attention once more to the meal.

Carlotta, having finished presently, leaned back in her chair and said casually, "By the way, Peter, I haven't heard you play Schumann's *Vogel als Prophet* for years as perfectly as you played it last night."

Jepson looked up in open-mouthed surprise. He put his fork down next his plate.

"What?" he asked incredulously. "What did you say?"

She looked at him in mild irritation. "The *Vogel als Prophet*," she repeated. "You played it very well last night."

"Last night," he murmured hesitantly. "Last night? But I didn't go near the piano after dinner yesterday," he protested in a flustered voice. "And I haven't played the *Vogel als Prophet* for months. You must have been dreaming, Carlotta."

She considered him, vague alarm for him evident on her face. "Oh, that's impossible, Peter. I was awake. I couldn't sleep. Why, I was even sitting up in bed. Oh, there's no doubt that I heard it—clear as could be. So you must have played it."

"But I didn't," he almost shouted. "I went to bed shortly after you did last night. I didn't go near the piano." He felt an unreasonable impulse to be furiously angry.

She raised her eyebrows and fixed him with startled eyes.

"But, Peter," she said gently, "I *know* I heard it. Then you must have played it in your sleep."

"What nonsense!" he snapped. "I am not and never have been a sleepwalker."

She regarded him for a moment with a baffled expression on her face. Then presently, almost belligerently, she said, "I suppose you'll tell me too that you weren't beating time or something in your room

last night with metal rods. Don't start shaking your head—I heard it just as plainly as I heard the music—*clink, clink, clink*—until I thought I'd have a headache. And I'm sure I heard you counting once in a while, too. There's no mistake about it."

"My God!" he murmured. It was all he could think of saying. And when she struck the table sharply with the flat of her hand and demanded to know what he had to say, he added meekly that very likely he *had* been sleepwalking. Seeing that this appeared to satisfy her, he left the table and went almost frantically to the telephone in his study, thanking whatever powers there were that Doctor Evans, the famous nerve specialist, had chosen to retire to Sac Prairie, his home town. He called the doctor and asked him to come as soon as possible to see Carlotta.

For the rest of the afternoon he was incapable of working under the stress of what he considered Carlotta's alarmingly violent hallucinations. He was troubled, too, by the persistently recurring memory of an uneasy dream he had had the previous night—a vague dream of four people about his bed, striving to touch him. He had got up that morning with the feeling of someone unknown close to him—a feeling as of someone trying to get at him, and now Carlotta's words had brought this feeling back to him. He remembered, too, the story of the bachelor tenant who had left the house saying that something had been trying to get *into him*.

Doctor Evans examined Carlotta that evening. When he came down the stairs after the examination, Jepson was waiting impatiently for him.

"Well, what do you make of her case?" he demanded.

"Very curious, very curious," murmured the doctor cautiously. "Certainly the house upsets her. Of course, it's a well-known fact that some places and often some people have disturbing effects on individuals, particularly nervous people like your sister. I could recount almost any number of similar cases."

"In your opinion, then, the house has a bad effect on her?"

Doctor Evans hesitated. "Bad? Well, it upsets her, as I said. I can't say it has an evil effect on her, but of course if this becomes chronic, her nerves will naturally suffer. I feel that she believes there's someone in the building, a group of people, evidently, whom she appears to think imprisoned here and who are trying to get at her. That sounds dangerously like incipient paranoia. The shutters seem to give her that suggestion, but I understand from her nurse that they're never closed. As a matter of fact, two people went mad in this house—I suppose you know that."

He stopped suddenly, an expression on his face as of some startling thought occurring to him.

"Mark Brendon and his wife," he murmured. "What an odd coincidence! I remember their persistent madness. It was dormant in the old folks, and came out in them—this feeling about the shutters. They were maddened by the obsession that the shutters and the garden-wall were keeping them from the town. Singular coincidence, isn't it?"

"You surely don't think that there's some *influence* at work?" asked Jepson incredulously, raising his voice. Even as he asked the question, a sudden suspicion assailed him.

Doctor Evans shook his head. "Oh, don't misunderstand me. I'm intimating nothing of the sort. Of course, there have been foolish rumors about the house, but they can be traced mostly to small boys, and I'm sure you know as well as I do that for the smalltown boy, a haunted house is almost a psychological necessity."

"You're hedging, Doctor."

"And you're jumping at conclusions, Mr. Jepson," said the doctor somewhat sharply. "Your sister's extremely nervous—that's all. I do think the house affects her, and if I were you, I'd remove her at once, or she may develop phobias."

For a moment Jepson faced the doctor, challenging him. But a host of troubled thoughts surged forward in his mind, and abruptly he asked. "Tell me, Doctor, is there such a thing as psychic force?"

Doctor Evans looked uneasy and glanced hastily at his watch.

"Yes," he said, somewhat reluctantly, "there is. Don't ask me to explain the why of it—I can't. But there is such a thing, indeed, yes. Psychic residue, some people call it. Often left at the scene of violent deaths, accidents, or vivid emotional outbursts."

"Like madness?"

"Like madness," replied the doctor.

They looked at each other wordlessly, the doctor fidgeting with his hat.

"And can whatever forces leave psychic residue return to this place?" demanded Jepson. "Can they come back—say, people who have died?"

"I don't know," said the doctor. "Are you expecting me to declare a belief in ghosts?"

Jepson ignored the question. "Tell me," he asked, with an odd intensity in his voice, "which of the rooms in this house was Josiah Brendon's bedroom, and who used to have the room my sister is occupying now?"

The doctor, somewhat disconcerted, thought a bit. Presently he

replied, "Old Josiah's room is the one just above your study, and——"

"My bedroom," interrupted Peter.

"And the room your sister has now used to be Elva Brendon's."

"Ah," said Jepson oddly. "And money being counted might sound like somebody beating time with metal rods, mightn't it?"

Doctor Evans looked at him with a professional eye, his first reaction one of alarm for Jepson's sanity.

"Tell me, Doctor," Jepson went on immediately, "did you know Elva Brendon very well?"

"Oh, yes," said the doctor expansively, and with some relief to find that Jepson's question was normal, coming as it did after his apparently irrelevant comment about money being counted. "A tall, handsome woman with silvery hair—what they call platinum blond now. But so sensitive!"

"Did she play the piano?" Jepson cut in.

"Very well, indeed."

"And I suppose she had a favorite piece?" pressed Jepson, an impatient eagerness in his voice.

"Oh, yes, two or three of them," replied the doctor. "But her prime favorite was a lovely little thing by Schumann—let me see, it was—yes, *The Bird as Prophet*."

Jepson drew a deep breath and half turned.

"Very well," he said suddenly, "I'll do as you suggest. Carlotta will be taken away; we'll both leave the house as soon as I can manage, the end of the week possibly. And thank you very much, Doctor. I shall expect your bill shortly."

Doctor Evans took his departure with a side-eyed glance at Jepson, and the growing belief that sooner or later the composer would need medical attention.

Having seen the doctor to the door, Jepson went upstairs to his sister. He sat down in a low lounging-chair next her couch.

"My dear," he asked abruptly, "are you sure it was the Schumann *Vogel als Prophet* you heard the other night?"

"Quite," said his sister firmly.

He pondered this. "And the clinking noise you heard—that could have been someone counting coins, couldn't it?"

She considered the suggestion and presently nodded. "Yes, it could," she said.

"Very well," he replied, smiling. "I've decided to take another house, Carlotta. We'll move the end of this week."

"Oh," she said shortly. Then, "What changed your mind so swiftly?"

"The doctor," he answered. "He thought the house might be unhealthy."

She nodded contentedly. Then suddenly she looked queerly around the room. Leaning forward, she caught his sleeve and whispered harshly, "Sooner, if we can. They're creeping closer—I can feel them trying to get in. The young one—she's the strongest."

Jepson did not trust himself to reply. He smiled sickishly and slipped from the room.

He went to bed that night shortly after ten o'clock, his mind crowded with troubled thoughts. He went to sleep feeling uncannily that his sister's hallucinations had a basis in fact.

Presently his troubled mind succumbed to dreams. He saw himself in the house from somewhere beyond it. He was in the house and he could feel himself in the house, yet he seemed to be looking down from a height. He saw Carlotta, her nurse, the maid, the cook—and four others weaving through the shadows of the garden, four strange figures, an old man, and an old woman, and not far from them, a young man with a young woman standing a little ahead. In his dream he recognized them as he saw them—Josiah Brendon, the miser, and his wife, the misanthrope, Mark Brendon and his wife, Elva, whose hair shone silver against the limitless darkness of the dream.

They came drifting toward the house in a terrifying silence, motionless save for their intent movements. Presently he saw them in the house, the young woman in the lead, a fiercely feral expression on her face. She was like a huntress. They were on the stairs, she still in the lead, though she had paused for a moment at the piano; and now in the hall on the second floor. The old man drifted into the room where the detached Jepson lay asleep, and presently he was sitting on the floor counting out money. Elva went on into Carlotta's room, while Mark and his mother hung back in the hall.

Then there was a startlingly vivid scene—Elva advancing upon Carlotta, who lay asleep, unaware of the fiercely eager eyes bearing down upon her. There was a sharp feeling of something trying to get in.

He came suddenly awake. The bedroom door had creaked open. He sat up in bed and moved to pull on the bed-lamp, but even as his hand rose, it was caught at the wrist, and before he could jerk it away, his sister's voice coming out of the darkness made it unnecessary.

"Good God, Carlotta, what are you doing?" he demanded.

"They're in the garden, they're in the garden, all four of them," she replied in a hushed and agitated voice. "They'll be coming in."

He made as if to put on the light, but again she stopped him.

"They might see," she warned. "Go to the window and look. They're coming."

He leapt from bed and went incautiously to the window. Then he drew sharply back into the shadow, away from the parallelogram of moonlight.

For there *were* people in the garden. Peter had a moment of anger at the invasion; then his anger froze into chilling alarm at the sudden recurrence of his dream. He stared intently down. There were four of them, just as Carlotta had said, just as he had dreamed. Four people coming slowly and intently down the path through the garden toward the house, a young woman in the lead, a young white-haired man following after, and at last an old man and an old woman. They were still-faced and pale in the moonlight, and their clothes were oddly black-green in the quiet light from above. They came stiffly on, their faces expressionless and cold, the young woman's lips slightly parted. They drifted past bushes and trees, momentarily lost in the deep shadows of overhanging limbs.

Then they came out into the clear moonlight before the French windows of his study below, and Jepson saw that the four of them stood unshadowed in the clear cold light from the summer moon—four figures standing inconceivably without shadows in a patch of unbroken moonlight!

There could no longer be any doubt—the four were the same as those of his ghastly dream—the Brendons. They had come back to reclaim this house, to find if possible new openings for material life!

At that moment Carlotta came trembling to his side. "Don't let them come in, don't let them come in. I'm afraid. It's the woman—the young woman—she's been here before, the night I heard you playing the piano. I didn't want to say anything—it was after that. She came to my room."

"They can't come in," he said dryly, remembering, even as he said it, that he had left the French windows open against the warm summer night. "I'll keep them out," he added. Then he flung himself away from the window, out of the room, and down the stairs.

The French windows stood wide, unbroken moonlight flooding the floor, its reflected radiance holding the room in a silver dusk. He stood for a moment undecided; then he went forward and looked cautiously outside. There was nothing there. He backed apprehensively into the room, chill terror creeping possessively into him, and closed the French windows behind him.

Then he heard something from above: a *clink—clink—clink*, coming from his bedroom.

He whirled at a gentle breath of melody from the piano, but there

was nothing there. Then he flung himself across the room and put on the light, leaning against the wall in the welcome glow that brought the room to life. After a minute, he looked carefully out into the hall and, seeing nothing, put on the light there, too.

He moved slowly toward the stairs, his eyes searching every darkened corner. Reaching the foot of the stairs, he turned to look around. He saw nothing.

Then abruptly he heard Carlotta's nurse scream.

He stood frozen while lights went up above, and in a moment the nurse herself appeared at the head of the stairs, her eyes wide with terror.

"Oh, Mr. Jepson!" she cried, seeing him.

Her voice broke him from his fright. He mounted the stairs, only dimly hearing the nurse say, "It's Miss Carlotta—something's wrong. She's talking very queerly. I can't seem able to do anything with her."

"I'll go to her," he said thickly.

In a moment he was standing outside his sister's room, her voice coming to him from within. Then he opened the door. He saw Carlotta on her knees at the window, looking out at the crumbling old garden wall.

He was nonplussed. "Carlotta," he said sharply, "you'll take cold there. Go back to bed."

"If you'll take them away," she replied in a low, unnatural voice, not turning from the glass. "Only take them away."

Jepson strode forward and stood over her, alarmed, looking down at her white face.

"I can't even see over the wall any more, and the garden—it's only weeds, vile, ugly weeds. And those awful shutters everywhere. Oh, Mark, take them away from my window. Always closed before my eyes. Take them away!"

"*Carlotta!*" he exclaimed hoarsely.

"Take them away, Mark. I can't see anything. I can't see the town." Her voice was a weary monotone, not recognizable to him.

He led her over and put her tenderly on her bed. "Carlotta," he murmured distractedly. He took hold of her hand and began to chafe it. He looked at her still face, and into eyes that did not see him. His hands were trembling.

"I could get better then, Mark—only take them away."

He stood shuddering, the memory of his dream and its meaning thrusting itself into his mind. Then suddenly he shouted loudly for the nurse and ran from the room to summon the doctor.

As he stood over the telephone, his eyes caught movement in the

moonlit square before the French windows. There were three figures moving down the garden path—a young man, an old man, and an old woman. The young woman was gone—Elva was gone, back in her old room. And the harsh voice that screamed from above was no longer alone Carlotta's, but partly Elva's, a voice that rose in sheer, maddening terror.

"Take them away! Take — them — away!"

He had waited too long. There would always be shutters now for Carlotta. Like an automaton he lifted the telephone from its cradle and called the doctor.

JUSTICE

The moving clouds let through occasional gleams of moonlight. Abel set out over the moor; its shapeless piles of granite were wreathed in tatters of white mist. The moorland path was the shortest way home. It was narrow and rugged, but Abel knew it well and could even distinguish a few mist-clad landmarks. He would soon be among the granite cairns.

The fitful moonlight made him stumble, and the path seemed to wind more than he remembered. How thick the mist was just here. If he lost the path he might go astray on the open moor—but what would that matter? A robust and sensible man such as he could come to no harm.

The moonlight made these rocks look rather horrible. Perhaps they were not rocks. This could hardly be the right path, winding senselessly about like this. What was that awful sound like laughter? Yet what had he to fear if this place were evil—was he not an upright and godly man who held no traffic with evil? If wicked spirits had power over such men as he there would be no justice in it.

"That's true," said a voice behind him, "there isn't."

—**"THE GIBSONS"**

In April, 1918, on the battlefield of Ypres, a shell snuffed out the life of an English soldier, William Hope Hodgson. But besides the life of one soldier, that shot put an end to one of the most promising minds that ever voyaged into the realm of imagination. During the two decades that followed his death, his writings fell into the deepest obscurity, and it was not until recently that the persistent campaigning of those fantasy fans who had unearthed him began to make headway. It was a short story, "The Voice in the Night," which appeared among a collection of stories in 1931 that awakened interest in these fans. And now that 1946 has seen the reissuance of several of Hodgson's best novels, we take pleasure in bringing back to print, "The Voice in the Night."

The Voice in the Night

by William Hope Hodgson

IT WAS a dark, starless night. We were becalmed in the Northern Pacific. Our exact position I do not know; for the sun had been hidden during the course of a weary, breathless week, by a thin haze which had seemed to float above us, about the height of our mastheads, at whiles descending and shrouding the surrounding sea.

With there being no wind, we had steadied the tiller, and I was the only man on deck. The crew, consisting of two men and a boy, were sleeping forrard in their den; while Will—my friend, and the master of our little craft—was aft in his bunk on the port side of the little cabin.

Suddenly, from out of the surrounding darkness, there came a hail:

'Schooner, ahoy!'

The cry was so unexpected that I gave no immediate answer, because of my surprise.

It came again—a voice curiously throaty and inhuman, calling from somewhere upon the dark sea away on our port broadside:

'Schooner, ahoy!'

'Hullo!' I sung out, having gathered my wits somewhat. 'What are you? What do you want?'

'You need not be afraid,' answered the queer voice, having probably noticed some trace of confusion in my tone. 'I am only an old—man.'

The pause sounded oddly; but it was only afterwards that it came back to me with any significance.

'Why don't you come alongside, then?' I queried somewhat snapshily; for I liked not his hinting at my having been a trifle shaken.

'I—I—can't. It wouldn't be safe. I——' The voice broke off, and there was silence.

'What do you mean?' I asked, growing more and more astonished. 'Why not safe? Where are you?'

I listened for a moment; but there came no answer. And then, a sudden indefinite suspicion, of I knew not what, coming to me, I stepped swiftly to the binnacle, and took out the lighted lamp. At the same time, I knocked on the deck with my heel to waken Will. Then I was back at the side, throwing the yellow funnel of light out into the silent immensity beyond our rail. As I did so, I heard a slight, muffled cry, and then the sound of a splash as though some one had dipped oars abruptly. Yet I cannot say that I saw anything with certainty; save, it seemed to me, that with the first flash of the light, there had been something upon the waters, where now there was nothing.

'Hullo, there!' I called. 'What foolery is this!'

But there came only the indistinct sounds of a boat being pulled away into the night.

Then I heard Will's voice, from the direction of the after scuttle:

'What's up, George?'

'Come here, Will!' I said.

'What is it?' he asked, coming across the deck.

I told him the queer thing which had happened. He put several questions; then, after a moment's silence, he raised his hands to his lips, and hailed:

'Boat, ahoy!'

From a long distance away there came back to us a faint reply, and my companion repeated his call. Presently, after a short period of silence, there grew on our hearing the muffled sound of oars; at which Will hailed again.

This time there was a reply:

'Put away the light.'

'I'm damned if I will,' I muttered; but Will told me to do as the voice bade, and I shoved it down under the bulwarks.

'Come nearer,' he said, and the oar-strokes continued. Then, when apparently some half-dozen fathoms distant, they again ceased.

'Come alongside,' exclaimed Will. 'There's nothing to be frightened of aboard here!'

'Promise that you will not show the light?'

'What's to do with you,' I burst out, 'that you're so infernally afraid of the light?'

'Because——' began the voice, and stopped short.

'Because what?' I asked quickly.

Will put his hand on my shoulder.

'Shut up a minute, old man,' he said, in a low voice. 'Let me tackle him.'

He leant more over the rail.

'See here, Mister,' he said, 'this is a pretty queer business, you coming upon us like this, right out in the middle of the blessed Pacific. How are we to know what sort of a hanky-panky trick you're up to? You say there's only one of you. How are we to know, unless we get a squint at you—eh? What's your objection to the light, anyway?'

As he finished, I heard the noise of the oars again, and then the voice came; but now from a greater distance, and sounding extremely hopeless and pathetic.

'I am sorry—sorry! I would not have troubled you, only I am hungry, and—so is she.'

The voice died away, and the sound of the oars, dipping irregularly, was borne to us.

'Stop!' sung out Will. 'I don't want to drive you away. Come back! We'll keep the light hidden, if you don't like it.'

He turned to me:

'It's a damned queer rig, this; but I think there's nothing to be afraid of?'

There was a question in his tone, and I replied.

'No, I think the poor devil's been wrecked around here, and gone crazy.'

The sound of the oars drew nearer.

'Shove that lamp back in the binnacle,' said Will; then he leaned over the rail and listened. I replaced the lamp, and came back to his side. The dipping of the oars ceased some dozen yards distant.

'Won't you come alongside now?' asked Will in an even voice. 'I have had the lamp put back in the binnacle.'

'I—I cannot,' replied the voice. 'I dare not come nearer. I dare not even pay you for the—the provisions.'

'That's all right,' said Will, and hesitated. 'You're welcome to as much grub as you can take——' Again he hesitated.

'You are very good,' exclaimed the voice. 'Mav God. Who understands everything, reward you——' It broke off huskily.

'The—the lady?' said Will abruptly. 'Is she——'

'I have left her behind upon the island,' came the voice.

'What island?' I cut in.

'I know not its name,' returned the voice. 'I would to God——!' it began, and checked itself as suddenly.

'Could we not send a boat for her?' asked Will at this point.

'No!' said the voice, with extraordinary emphasis. 'My God! No!' There was a moment's pause; then it added, in a tone which seemed a merited reproach:

'It was because of our want I ventured—because her agony tortured me.'

'I am a forgetful brute,' exclaimed Will. 'Just wait a minute, whoever you are, and I will bring you up something at once.'

In a couple of minutes he was back again, and his arms were full of various edibles. He paused at the rail.

'Can't you come alongside for them?' he asked.

'No—I *dare not*,' replied the voice, and it seemed to me that in its tones I detected a note of stifled craving—as though the owner hushed a mortal desire. It came to me then in a flash, that the poor old creature out there in the darkness, was *suffering* for actual need of that which Will held in his arms; and yet, because of some unintelligible dread, refraining from dashing to the side of our little schooner, and receiving it. And with the lightning-like conviction, there came the knowledge that the Invisible was not mad; but sanely facing some intolerable horror.

'Damn it, Will!' I said, full of many feelings, over which predominated a vast sympathy. 'Get a box. We must float off the stuff to him in it.'

This we did—propelling it away from the vessel, out into the darkness, by means of a boathook. In a minute, a slight cry from the Invisible came to us, and we knew that he had secured the box.

A little later, he called out a farewell to us, and so heartfelt a blessing, that I am sure we were the better for it. Then, without more ado, we heard the ply of oars across the darkness.

'Pretty soon off,' remarked Will, with perhaps just a little sense of injury.

'Wait,' I replied. 'I think somehow he'll come back. He must have been badly needing that food.'

'And the lady,' said Will. For a moment he was silent; then he continued:

'It's the queerest thing ever I've tumbled across, since I've been fishing.'

'Yes,' I said, and fell to pondering.

And so the time slipped away—an hour, another, and still Will

stayed with me; for the queer adventure had knocked all desire for sleep out of him.

The third hour was three parts through, when we heard again the sound of oars across the silent ocean.

'Listen!' said Will, a low note of excitement in his voice.

'He's coming, just as I thought,' I muttered.

The dipping of the oars grew nearer, and I noted that the strokes were firmer and longer. The food had been needed.

They came to a stop a little distance off the broadside, and the queer voice came again to us through the darkness:

'Schooner, ahoy!'

'That you?' asked Will.

'Yes,' replied the voice. 'I left you suddenly; but—but there was great need.'

'The lady?' questioned Will.

'The—lady is grateful now on earth. She will be more grateful soon in—in heaven.'

Will began to make some reply, in a puzzled voice; but became confused, and broke off short. I said, nothing. I was wondering at the curious pauses, and, apart from my wonder, I was full of a great sympathy.

The voice continued:

'We—she and I, have talked, as we shared the result of God's tenderness and yours——'

Will interposed; but without coherence.

'I beg of you not to—to belittle your deed of Christian charity this night,' said the voice. 'Be sure that it has not escaped His notice.'

It stopped, and there was a full minute's silence. Then it came again:

'We have spoken together upon that which—which has befallen us. We had thought to go out, without telling any, of the terror which has come into our—lives. She is with me in believing that to-night's happenings are under a special ruling, and that it is God's wish that we should tell to you all that we have suffered since—since——'

'Yes?' said Will softly.

'Since the sinking of the *Albatross*.'

'Ah!' I exclaimed involuntarily. 'She left Newcastle for 'Frisco some six months ago, and hasn't been heard of since.'

'Yes,' answered the voice. 'But some few degrees to the north of the line she was caught in a terrible storm, and dismayed. When the day came, it was found that she was leaking badly, and presently, it falling to a calm, the sailors took to the boats, leaving—leaving a young lady—my fiancée—and myself upon the wreck.'

'We were below, gathering together a few of our belongings, when they left. They were entirely callous, through fear, and when we came up upon the decks, we saw them only as small shapes afar off upon the horizon. Yet we did not despair, but set to work and constructed a small raft. Upon this we put such few matters as it would hold, including a quantity of water and some ship's biscuit. Then, the vessel being very deep in the water, we got ourselves on to the raft, and pushed off.

'It was later, when I observed that we seemed to be in the way of some tide or current, which bore us from the ship at an angle; so that in the course of three hours, by my watch, her hull became invisible to our sight, her broken masts remaining in view for a somewhat longer period. Then, towards evening, it grew misty, and so through the night. The next day we were still encompassed by the mist, the weather remaining quiet.

'For four days we drifted through this strange haze, until, on the evening of the fourth day, there grew upon our ears the murmur of breakers at a distance. Gradually it became plainer, and, somewhat after midnight, it appeared to sound upon either hand at no very great space. The raft was raised upon a swell several times, and then we were in smooth water, and the noise of the breakers was behind.

'When the morning came, we found that we were in a sort of great lagoon; but of this we noticed little at the time; for close before us, through the enshrouding mist, loomed the hull of a large sailing-vessel. With one accord, we fell upon our knees and thanked God; for we thought that here was an end to our perils. We had much to learn.

'The raft drew near to the ship, and we shouted on them to take us aboard; but none answered. Presently the raft touched against the side of the vessel, and, seeing a rope hanging downwards, I seized it and began to climb. Yet I had much ado to make my way up, because of a kind of grey, lichenous fungus which had seized upon the rope, and which blotched the side of the ship lividly.

'I reached the rail and clambered over it, on to the deck. Here I saw that the decks were covered, in great patches, with the grey masses, some of them rising into nodules several feet in height; but at the time I thought less of this matter than of the possibility of there being people aboard the ship. I shouted; but none answered. Then I went to the door below the poop deck. I opened it, and peered in. There was a great smell of staleness, so that I knew in a moment that nothing living was within, and with the knowledge, I shut the door quickly; for I felt suddenly lonely.

'I went back to the side where I had scrambled up. My—my sweetheart was still sitting quietly upon the raft! Seeing me look

down she called up to know whether there was any aboard of the ship. I replied that the vessel had the appearance of having been long deserted; but that if she would wait a little I would see whether there was anything in the shape of a ladder by which she could ascend to the deck. Then we would make a search through the vessel together. A little later, on the opposite side of the decks, I found a rope side-ladder. This I carried across, and a minute afterwards she was beside me.

'Together we explored the cabins and apartments in the after part of the ship; but nowhere was there any sign of life. Here and there, within the cabins themselves, we came across odd patches of that queer fungus; but this, as my sweetheart said, could be cleansed away.

'In the end, having assured ourselves that the after portion of the vessel was empty, we picked our ways to the bows, between the ugly grey nodules of that strange growth; and here we made a further search, which told us that there was indeed none aboard but ourselves.

'This being now beyond any doubt, we returned to the stern of the ship and proceeded to make ourselves as comfortable as possible. Together we cleared out and cleaned two of the cabins; and after that I made examination whether there was anything eatable in the ship. This I soon found was so, and thanked God in my heart for His goodness. In addition to this I discovered the whereabouts of the fresh-water pump, and having fixed it I found the water drinkable, though somewhat unpleasant to the taste.

'For several days we stayed aboard the ship, without attempting to get to the shore. We were busily engaged in making the place habitable. Yet even thus early we became aware that our lot was even less to be desired than might have been imagined; for though, as a first step, we scraped away the odd patches of growth that studded the floors and walls of the cabins and saloon, yet they returned almost to their original size within the space of twenty-four hours, which not only discouraged us, but gave us a feeling of vague unease.

'Still we would not admit ourselves beaten, so set to work afresh, and not only scraped away the fungus, but soaked the places where it had been, with carbolic, a can-full of which I had found in the pantry. Yet, by the end of the week the growth had returned in full strength, and, in addition, it had spread to other places, as though our touching it had allowed germs from it to travel elsewhere.

'On the seventh morning, my sweetheart woke to find a small patch of it growing on her pillow, close to her face. At that, she came to me, so soon as she could get her garments upon her. I was in the galley at the time lighting the fire for breakfast.

"Come here, John," she said, and led me aft. When I saw the thing upon her pillow I shuddered, and then and there we agreed to go right out of the ship and see whether we could not fare to make ourselves more comfortable ashore.

Hurriedly we gathered together our few belongings, and even among these I found that the fungus had been at work; for one of her shawls had a little lump of it growing near one edge. I threw the whole thing over the side, without saying anything to her.

The raft was still alongside, but it was too clumsy to guide, and I lowered down a small boat that hung across the stern, and in this we made our way to the shore. Yet, as we drew near to it, I became gradually aware that here the vile fungus, which had driven us from the ship, was growing riot. In places it rose into horrible, fantastic mounds, which seemed almost to quiver, as with a quiet life, when the wind blew across them. Here and there it took on the forms of vast fingers, and in others it just spread out flat and smooth and treacherous. Odd places, it appeared as grotesque stunted trees, seeming extraordinarily kinked and gnarled—— The whole quaking vilely at times.

At first, it seemed to us that there was no single portion of the surrounding shore which was not hidden beneath the masses of the hideous lichen; yet, in this, I found we were mistaken; for somewhat later, coasting along the shore at a little distance, we descried a smooth white patch of what appeared to be fine sand, and there we landed. It was not sand. What it was I do not know. All that I have observed is that upon it the fungus will not grow while everywhere else, save where the sand-like earth wanders oddly, pathwise, amid the grey desolation of the lichen, there's nothing but that loathsome greyness.

It is difficult to make you understand how cheered we were to find one place that was absolutely free from the growth, and here we deposited our belongings. Then we went back to the ship for such things as it seemed to us we should need. Among other matters, I managed to bring ashore with me one of the ship's sails, with which I constructed two small tents, which, though exceedingly rough-shaped, served the purposes for which they were intended. In these we lived and stored our various necessities, and thus for a matter of four weeks all went smoothly and without particular unhappiness. Indeed, I may say with much of happiness—for—for we're together.

It was on the thumb of her right hand that the growth first showed. It was only a small circular spot, much like a little grey mole. My God! how the fear leapt to my heart when she showed me the place. We cleansed it, between us, washing it with carbolic and water. In the morning of the following day she showed her hand to me again. The grey warty thing had returned. For a little while, we

looked at one another in silence. Then, still wordless, we started again to remove it. In the midst of the operation she spoke suddenly.

"What's that on the side of your face, dear?" Her voice was sharp with anxiety. I put my hand up to feel.

"There! Under the hair by your ear. A little to the front a bit." My finger rested upon the place, and then I knew.

"Let us get your thumb done first," I said. And she submitted, only because she was afraid to touch me until it was cleansed. I finished washing and disinfecting her thumb, and then she turned to my face. After it was finished we sat together and talked awhile of many things; for there had come into our lives sudden, very terrible thoughts. We were, all at once, afraid of something worse than death. We spoke of loading the boat with provisions and water and making our way out on to the sea; yet we were helpless, for many causes, and—and the growth had attacked us already. We decided to stay. God would do with us what was His will. We would wait.

'A month, two months, three months passed and the places grew somewhat, and there had come others. Yet we fought so strenuously with the fear that its headway was but slow, comparatively speaking.

'Occasionally we ventured off to the ship for such stores as we needed. There we found that the fungus grew persistently. One of the nodules on the main deck became soon as high as my head.

'We had now given up all thought or hope of leaving the island. We had realized that it would be unallowable to go among healthy humans, with the things from which we were suffering.

'With this determination and knowledge in our minds we knew that we should have to husband our food and water; for we did not know, at that time, but that we should possibly live for many years.

'This reminds me that I have told you that I am an old man. Judged by years this is not so. But—but——'

He broke off; then continued somewhat abruptly:

'As I was saying, we knew that we should have to use care in the matter of food. But we had no idea then how little food there was left, of which to take care. It was a week later that I made the discovery that all the other bread tanks—which I had supposed full—were empty, and that (beyond odd tins of vegetables and meat, and some other matters) we had nothing on which to depend, but the bread in the tank which I had already opened.

'After learning this I bestirred myself to do what I could, and set to work at fishing in the lagoon; but with no success. At this I was somewhat inclined to feel desperate until the thought came to me to try outside the lagoon, in the open sea.

'Here, at times, I caught odd fish; but so infrequently that they proved of but little help in keeping us from the hunger which

threatened. It seemed to me that our deaths were likely to come by hunger, and not by the growth of the thing which had seized upon our bodies.

'We were in this state of mind when the fourth month wore out. Then I made a very horrible discovery. One morning, a little before midday, I came off from the ship with a portion of the biscuits which were left. In the mouth of her tent I saw my sweetheart sitting, eating something.

'“What is it, my dear?” I called out as I leapt ashore. Yet, on hearing my voice, she seemed confused, and, turning, slyly threw something towards the edge of the little clearing. It fell short, and a vague suspicion having arisen within me, I walked across and picked it up. It was a piece of the grey fungus.

'As I went to her with it in my hand, she turned deadly pale; then a rose red.

'I felt strangely dazed and frightened.

'“My dear! My dear!” I said, and could say no more. Yet at my words she broke down and cried bitterly. Gradually, as she calmed, I got from her the news that she had tried it the preceding day, and— and liked it. I got her to promise on her knees not to touch it again, however great our hunger. After she had promised she told me that the desire for it had come suddenly, and that, until the moment of desire, she had experienced nothing towards it but the most extreme repulsion.

'Later in the day, feeling strangely restless, and much shaken with the thing which I had discovered, I made my way along one of the twisted paths—formed by the white, sand-like substance—which led among the fungoid growth. I had, once before, ventured along there; but not to any great distance. This time, being involved in perplexing thought, I went much further than hitherto.

'Suddenly I was called to myself by a queer hoarse sound on my left. Turning quickly I saw that there was movement among an extraordinarily shaped mass of fungus, close to my elbow. It was swaying uneasily, as though it possessed life of its own. Abruptly, as I stared, the thought came to me that the thing had a grotesque resemblance to the figure of a distorted human creature. Even as the fancy flashed into my brain, there was a slight, sickening noise of tearing, and I saw that one of the branch-like arms was detaching itself from the surrounding grey masses, and coming towards me. The head of the thing—a shapeless grey ball, inclined in my direction. I stood stupidly, and the vile arm brushed across my face. I gave out a frightened cry, and ran back a few paces. There was a sweetish taste upon my lips where the thing had touched me. I licked them, and was immediately filled with an inhuman desire. I turned and seized a mass of the fungus. Then more, and—more.

I was insatiable. In the midst of devouring, the remembrance of the morning's discovery swept into my mazed brain. It was sent by God. I dashed the fragment I held to the ground. Then, utterly wretched and feeling a dreadful guiltiness, I made my way back to the little encampment.

'I think she knew, by some marvellous intuition which love must have given, so soon as she set eyes on me. Her quiet sympathy made it easier for me, and I told her of my sudden weakness; yet omitted to mention the extraordinary thing which had gone before. I desired to spare her all unnecessary terror.

'But, for myself, I had added an intolerable knowledge, to breed an incessant terror in my brain; for I doubted not but that I had seen the end of one of those men who had come to the island in the ship in the lagoon; and in that monstrous ending I had seen our own.

'Thereafter we kept from the abominable food, though the desire for it had entered into our blood. Yet our drear punishment was upon us; for, day by day, with monstrous rapidity, the fungoid growth took hold of our poor bodies. Nothing we could do would check it materially, and so—and so—we who had been human, became—— Well, it matters less each day. Only—only we had been man and maid!

'And day by day the fight is more dreadful, to withstand the hunger-lust for the terrible lichen.

'A week ago we ate the last of the biscuit, and since that time I have caught three fish. I was out here fishing tonight when your schooner drifted upon me out of the mist. I hailed you. You know the rest, and may God, out of His great heart, bless you for your goodness to a—a couple of poor outcast souls.'

There was the dip of an oar—another. Then the voice came again, and for the last time, sounding through the slight surrounding mist, ghostly and mournful.

'God bless you! Good-bye!'

'Good-bye,' we shouted together, hoarsely, our hearts full of many emotions.

I glanced about me. I became aware that the dawn was upon us.

The sun flung a stray beam across the hidden sea; pierced the mist dully, and lit up the receding boat with a gloomy fire. Indistinctly I saw something nodding between the oars. I thought of a sponge—a great, grey nodding sponge—— The oars continued to ply. They were grey—as was the boat—and my eyes searched a moment vainly for the conjunction of hand and oar. My gaze flashed back to the head. It nodded forward as the oars went backward for the stroke. Then the oars were dipped, the boat shot out of the patch of light, and the—the thing went nodding into the mist.

A. Merritt, long considered the dean of fantasy writers, did not produce many stories under the novel length. When he did they were sure to be long remembered. By virtue of being his only piece to appear in Weird Tales magazine, "The Woman of the Wood" became also the scarcest of his tales. Yet it is perhaps one of his best, a poignant and wonderful romance of an enchanted wood and of the beings that dwell within the living mystery of the trees. . . .

The Woman of the Wood

by A. Merritt

McKAY sat on the balcony of the little inn that squatted like a brown gnome among the pines that clothed the eastern shore of the lake.

It was a small and lonely lake high up on the Vosges; and yet the word "lonely" is not just the one to tag its spirit; rather was it aloof, withdrawn. The mountains came down on every side, making a vast tree-lined bowl that seemed filled, when McKay first saw it, with a still wine of peace.

McKay had worn the wings with honor in the World War. And as a bird loves the trees, so did McKay love them. They were to him not merely trunks and roots, branches and leaves; they were personalities. He was acutely aware of character differences even among the same species—that pine was jolly and benevolent; that one austere, monkish; there stood a swaggering bravo and there a sage wrapped in green meditation; that birch was a wanton—the one beside her virginal, still adream.

The war had sapped McKay, nerve, brain and soul. Through all the years that had passed the wound had kept open. But now, as he slid his car down the side of the great green bowl, he felt its peace reach out to him, caress and quiet him, promise him healing. He seemed to drift like a falling leaf through the cathedraled woods; to be cradled by the hands of the trees.

McKay had stopped at the little gnome of an inn, and there he had lingered, day after day, week after week.

The trees had nursed him; soft whisperings of the leaves, slow chant of the needled pines, had first deadened, then driven from him the re-echoing clamor of the war and its sorrow. The open wound of his spirit had closed under their healing, had closed and become scars; and then even the scars had been covered and buried, as the scars on Earth's breast are covered and buried beneath the falling leaves of autumn. The trees had laid healing hands upon his eyes. He had sucked strength from the green breasts of the hills.

As that strength flowed back to him, McKay grew aware that the place was—troubled; that there was ferment of fear within it.

It was as though the trees had waited until he himself had become whole before they made their own unrest known to him. But now they were trying to tell him something; there was a shrillness as of apprehension, of anger, in the whispering of the leaves, the needled chanting of the pines.

And it was this that had kept McKay at the inn—a definite consciousness of appeal. He strained his ears to catch words in the rustling branches, words that trembled on the brink of his human understanding. Never did they cross that brink.

Gradually he had focused himself, so he believed, to the point of the valley's unease.

On all of the shores of the lake there were but two dwellings. One was the inn, and around the inn the trees clustered protectively, confidently, friendly. It was as though they had not only accepted it, but had made it part of themselves.

Not so was it of the other habitation. Once it had been the hunting-lodge of long-dead lords; now it was half ruined, forlorn. It lay across the lake almost exactly opposite the inn and back upon the slope a half-mile from the shore. Once there had been fat fields around it and a fair orchard.

The forest had marched down upon fields and lodge. Here and there scattered pines and poplars stood like soldiers guarding some outpost; scouting parties of saplings lurked among the gaunt, broken fruit trees. But the forest had not had its way unchecked; ragged stumps showed where those who dwelt in the old house had cut down the invaders; blackened patches showed where they had fired the woods.

Here was the center of the conflict. Here the green folk of the forest were both menaced and menacing, at war.

The lodge was a fortress beleaguered by the trees, a fortress whose garrison sallied forth with ax and torch to take their toll of their besiegers.

Yet McKay sensed a slow, inexorable pressing on of the forest; he saw it as an army ever filling the gaps in its enclosing ranks,

shooting its seeds into the cleared places, sending its roots out to sap them; and armed always with a crushing patience. He had the impression of constant regard, of watchfulness, as though night and day the forest kept myriads of eyes upon the lodge, inexorably, not to be swerved from its purpose. He had spoken of this impression to the innkeeper and his wife, and they had looked at him, oddly.

"Old Polleau does not love the trees, no," the old man had said. "No, nor do his two sons. They do not love the trees—and very certainly the trees do not love them."

Between the lodge and the shore, marching down to the verge of the lake was a singularly beautiful little coppice of silver birches and firs. This coppice stretched for perhaps a quarter of a mile; it was not more than a hundred feet or two in depth, and not alone the beauty of its trees but also their curious grouping vividly aroused McKay's interest. At each end were a dozen or more of the glistening, needled firs, not clustered but spread out as though in open marching order; at widely spaced intervals along its other two sides paced single firs. The birches, slender and delicate, grew within the guard of these sturdier trees, yet not so thickly as to crowd one another.

To McKay the silver birches were for all the world like some gay caravan of lovely demoiselles under the protection of debonaire knights. With that odd other sense of his he saw the birches as delectable damsels, merry and laughing—the pines as lovers, troubadours in green-needled mail. And when the winds blew and the crests of the trees bent under them, it was as though dainty demoiselles picked up fluttering, leafy skirts, bent leafy hoods and danced while the knights of the firs drew closer round them, locked arms and danced with them to the roaring horns of the winds. At such times he almost heard sweet laughter from the birches, shoutings from the firs.

Of all the trees in that place McKay loved best this little wood. He had rowed across and rested in its shade, had dreamed there and, dreaming, had heard mysterious whisperings and the sound of dancing feet light as falling leaves; had taken dream-draft of that gayety which was the soul of the little wood.

Two days ago he had seen Polleau and his two sons. McKay had lain dreaming in the coppice all that afternoon. As dusk began to fall he had reluctantly arisen and begun to row back to the inn. When he had been a few hundred feet from shore three men had come out from the trees and had stood watching him—three grim powerful men taller than the average French peasant.

He had called a friendly greeting to them, but they had not an-

swered it; had stood there, scowling. Then as he bent again to his oars, one of the sons had raised a hatchet and driven it savagely into the trunk of a slim birch. McKay thought he heard a thin, wailing cry from the stricken tree, a sigh from all the little wood.

He had felt as though the keen edge had bitten into his own flesh. "Stop that!" he had cried. "Stop it, damn you!"

For answer Polleau's son had struck again—and never had McKay seen hate etched so deep as on his face as he struck. Cursing, a killing rage in his heart, McKay had swung the boat around, raced back to shore. He had heard the hatchet strike again and again and, close now to shore, had heard a crackling and over it once more the thin, high wailing. He had turned to look.

The birch was tottering, was falling. Close beside it grew one of the firs, and, as the smaller tree crashed over, it dropped upon this fir like a fainting maid into the arms of her lover. And as it lay and trembled there, one of the branches of the other tree slipped from under it, whipped out and smote the hatchet-wielder a crushing blow upon the head, sending him to earth.

It had been, of course, only the chance blow of a bough, bent by pressure of the fallen trunk and then released as that had slipped down. Of course—yet there had been such suggestion of conscious action in the branch's recoil, so much of bitter anger in it, so much, in truth, had it been like a purposeful blow that McKay felt an eery prickling of his scalp; his heart had missed its beat.

For a moment Polleau and the standing son had stared at the sturdy fir with the silvery birch lying upon its green breast; folded in and shielded by its needled boughs as though—again the swift impression came to McKay—as though it were a wounded maid stretched on breast, in arms, of knightly lover. For a long moment father and son had stared.

Then, still wordless but with that same bitter hatred in both their faces, they had stooped and picked up the other and, with his arms around the neck of each, had borne him limply away.

McKay, sitting on the balcony of the inn that morning, went over and over that scene, realized more and more clearly the human aspect of fallen birch and clasping fir, and the conscious deliberateness of the latter's blow. During the two days that had elapsed since then, he had felt the unease of the trees increase, their whispering appeal become more urgent.

What were they trying to tell him? What did they want him to do?

Troubled, he stared across the lake, trying to pierce the mists that hung over it and hid the opposite shore. And suddenly it seemed that

he heard the coppice calling him, felt it pull the point of his attention toward it irresistibly, as the lodestone swings and holds the compass needle.

The coppice called him; it bade him come.

McKay obeyed the command; he arose and walked down to the boat landing; he stepped into his skiff and began to row across the lake. As his oars touched the water his trouble fell from him. In its place flowed peace and a curious exaltation.

The mists were thick upon the lake. There was no breath of wind, yet the mists billowed and drifted, shook and curtained under the touch of unfelt airy hands.

They were alive—the mists; they formed themselves into fantastic palaces past whose opalescent façades he flew; they built themselves into hills and valleys and circled plains whose floors were rippling silk. Tiny rainbows gleamed out among them, and upon the water prismatic patches shone and spread like spilled wine of opals. He had the illusion of vast distances—the hillocks of mist were real mountains, the valleys between them were not illusory. He was a colossus cleaving through some elfin world. A trout broke, and it was like Leviathan leaping from the fathomless deep. Around the arc of the fish's body rainbows interlaced and then dissolved into rain of softly gleaming gems—diamonds in dance with sapphires, flame-hearted rubies, pearls with shimmering souls of rose. The fish vanished, diving cleanly without sound; the jeweled bows vanished with it; a tiny irised whirlpool swirled for an instant where trout and flashing arcs had been.

Nowhere was there sound. He let his oars drop and leaned forward, drifting. In the silence, before him and around him, he felt opening the gateways of an unknown world.

And suddenly he heard the sound of voices, many voices, faint at first and murmurous. Louder they became, swiftly; women's voices sweet and lilting, and mingled with them the deeper tones of men; voices that lifted and fell in a wild, gay chanting through whose *joyesse* ran undertones both of sorrow and of anger—as though faery weavers threaded through silk spun of sunbeams, somber strands dipped in the black of graves, and crimson strands stained in the red of wrathful sunsets.

He drifted on, scarce daring to breathe lest even that faint sound break the elfin song. Closer it rang and clearer, and now he became aware that the speed of his boat was increasing, that it was no longer drifting; as though the little waves on each side were pushing him ahead with soft and noiseless palms. His boat grounded, and as its keel rustled along over the smooth pebbles of the beach the song ceased.

McKay half arose and peered before him. The mists were thicker here, but he could see the outlines of the coppice. It was like looking at it through many curtains of fine gauze, and its trees seemed shifting, ethereal, unreal. And moving among the trees were figures that threaded among the boles and flitted round them in rhythmic measures, like the shadows of leafy boughs swaying to some cadenced wind.

He stepped ashore. The mists dropped behind him, shutting off all sight of the lake; and as they dropped, McKay lost all sense of strangeness, all feeling of having entered some unfamiliar world. Rather was it as though he had returned to one he had once known well and that had been long lost to him.

The rhythmic flitting had ceased; there was now no movement as there was no sound among the trees—yet he felt the little wood full of watchful life. McKay tried to speak; there was a spell of silence on his mouth.

"You called me. I have come to listen to you—to help you if I can."

The words formed within his mind, but utter them he could not. Over and over he tried, desperately; the words seemed to die on his lips.

A pillar of mist whirled forward and halted, eddying half an arm-length away. Suddenly out of it peered a woman's face, eyes level with his own. A woman's face—yes; but McKay, staring into those strange eyes probing his, knew that, woman's though it seemed, it was that of no woman of human breed. They were without pupils, the irises deer-large and of the soft green of deep forest dells; within them sparkled tiny star-points of light like motes in a moonbeam. The eyes were wide and set far apart beneath a broad, low brow over which was piled braid upon braid of hair of palest gold, braids that seemed spun of shining ashes of gold. The nose was small and straight, the mouth scarlet and exquisite. The face was oval, tapering to a delicately pointed chin.

Beautiful was that face, but its beauty was an alien one, unearthly. For long moments the strange eyes thrust their gaze deep into his. Then out of the mist were thrust two slender white arms, the hands long, the fingers tapering.

The tapering fingers touched his ears.

"He shall hear," whispered the red lips.

Immediately from all about him a cry arose; in it were the whispering and rustling of the leaves beneath the breath of the winds; the shrilling of the harpstrings of the boughs; the laughter of hidden brooks; the shoutings of waters flinging themselves down into deep and rocky pools—the voices of the forest made articulate.

"He shall hear!" they cried.

The long white fingers rested on his lips, and their touch was cool as bark of birch on cheek after some long upward climb through forest; cool and subtly sweet.

"He shall speak," whispered the scarlet lips of the wood woman.

"He shall speak!" answered the wood voices again, as though in litany.

"He shall see," whispered the woman, and the cold fingers touched his eyes.

"He shall see!" echoed the wood voices.

The mists that had hidden the coppice from McKay wavered, thinned and were gone. In their place was a limpid, translucent, palely green *aether*, faintly luminous—as though he stood within some clear wan emerald. His feet pressed a golden moss spangled with tiny starry bluets. Fully revealed before him was the woman of the strange eyes and the face of unearthly beauty. He dwelt for a moment upon the slender shoulders, the firm, small, tip-tilted breasts, the willow liteness of her body. From neck to knees a smock covered her, sheer and silken and delicate as spun cobwebs; through it her body gleamed as though fire of the young spring moon ran in her veins.

He looked beyond her. There upon the golden moss were other women like her, many of them; they stared at him with the same wide-set green eyes in which danced the sparkling moonbeam motes; like her they were crowned with glistening, pallidly golden hair; like hers, too, were their oval faces with the pointed chins and perilous alien beauty. Only where she stared at him gravely, measuring him, weighing him—there were those of her sisters whose eyes were mocking; and those whose eyes called to him with a weirdly tingling allure, their mouths athirst; those whose eyes looked upon him with curiosity alone; those whose great eyes pleaded with him, prayed to him.

Within that pellucid, greenly lumipous *aether* McKay was abruptly aware that the trees of the coppice still had a place. Only now they were spectral indeed. They were like white shadows cast athwart a glaucous screen; trunk and bough, twig and leaf they arose around him and they were as though etched in air by phantom craftsmen—thin and unsubstantial; they were ghost trees rooted in another space.

He was aware that there were men among the women; men whose eyes were set wide apart as were theirs, as strange and pupilless as were theirs, but with irises of brown and blue; men with pointed chins and oval faces, broad-shouldered and clad in kirtles of darkest green; swarthy-skinned men, muscular and strong, with that same

lithe grace of the women—and like them of a beauty that was alien and elfin.

McKay heard a little wailing cry. He turned. Close beside him lay a girl clasped in the arms of one of the swarthy, green-clad men. She lay upon his breast. His eyes were filled with a black flame of wrath, and hers were misted, anguished. For an instant McKay had a glimpse of the birch that old Polleau's son had sent crashing down into the boughs of the fir. He saw birch and fir as immaterial outlines around this man and this girl. For an instant girl and man and birch and fir seemed to be one and the same.

The scarlet-lipped woman touched his shoulder.

"She withers," sighed the woman, and in her voice McKay heard a faint rustling as of mournful leaves. "Now is it not pitiful that she withers—our sister who was so young, so slender and so lovely?"

McKay looked again at the girl. The white skin seemed shrunken; the moon radiance that gleamed through the bodies of the others was still in hers, but dim and pallid; her slim arms hung listlessly; her body drooped. Her mouth was wan and parched, her long and misted green eyes dull. The palely golden hair was lusterless and dry. He looked on a slow death—a withering death.

"May the arm that struck her down wither!" said the green-clad man who held her, and in his voice McKay heard a savage strumming as of winter winds through bleak boughs: "May his heart wither and the sun blast him! May the rain and the waters deny him and the winds scourge him!"

"I thirst," whispered the girl.

There was a stirring among the watching women. One came forward holding a chalice that was like thin leaves turned to green crystal. She paused beside the trunk of one of the spectral trees, reached up and drew down to her a branch. A slim girl with half-frightened, half-resentful eyes glided to her side and threw her arms around the ghostly bole. The woman cut the branch deep with what seemed an arrow-shaped flake of jade and held her chalice under it. From the cut a faintly opalescent liquid dripped into the cup. When it was filled, the woman beside McKay stepped forward and pressed her own long hands around the bleeding branch. She stepped away and McKay saw that the stream had ceased to flow. She touched the trembling girl and unclasped her arms.

"It is healed," said the woman gently. "And it was your turn, little sister. The wound is healed. Soon you will have forgotten."

The woman with the chalice knelt and set it to the wan, dry lips of her who was—withering. She drank of it, thirstily, to the last drop. The misty eyes cleared, they sparkled; the lips that had been so

parched and pale grew red, the white body gleamed as though the waning light within it had been fed with new.

"Sing, sisters," the girl cried shrilly. "Dance for me, sisters!"

Again burst out that chant McKay had heard as he had floated through the mists upon the lake. Now, as then, despite his open ears, he could distinguish no words, but clearly he understood its mingled themes—the joy of spring's awakening, rebirth, with green life streaming, singing up through every bough, swelling the buds, burgeoning with tender leaves the branches; the dance of the trees in the scented winds of spring; the drums of the jubilant rain on leafy hoods; passion of summer sun pouring its golden flood down upon the trees; the moon passing with stately steps and slow, and green hands reaching up to her and drawing from her breast milk of silver fire; riot of wild gay winds with their mad pipings and strummings; soft interlacing of boughs; the kiss of amorous leaves—all these and more, much more that McKay could not understand since they dealt with hidden, secret things for which man has no images, were in that chanting.

And all these and more were in the rhythms of the dancing of those strange, green-eyed women and brown-skinned men; something incredibly ancient, yet young as the speeding moment; something of a world before and beyond man.

McKay listened; he watched, lost in wonder, his own world more than half forgotten.

The woman beside him touched his arm. She pointed to the girl.

"Yet she withers," she said. "And not all our life, if we poured it through her lips, could save her."

He saw that the red was draining slowly from the girl's lips, that the luminous life-tides were waning. The eyes that had been so bright were misting and growing dull once more. Suddenly a great pity and a great rage shook him. He knelt beside her, took her hands in his.

"Take them away! Take away your hands! They burn me!" she moaned.

"He tries to help you," whispered the green-clad man, gently. But he reached over and drew McKay's hands away.

"Not so can you help her or us," said the woman.

"What can I do?" McKay arose, looked helplessly from one to the other. "What can I do to help you?"

The chanting died, the dance stopped. A silence fell, and he felt upon him the eyes of all these strange people. They were tense, waiting. The woman took his hands. Their touch was cool and sent a strange sweetness sweeping through his veins.

"There are three men yonder," she said. "They hate us. Soon we

shall all be as she is there—withering! They have sworn it, and as they have sworn so will they do. Unless——”

She paused. The moonbeam dancing motes in her eyes changed to tiny sparklings of red that terrified him.

“Three men?” In his clouded mind was dim memory of Polleau and his two strong sons. “Three men?” he repeated, stupidly. “But what are three men to you who are so many? What could three men do against those stalwart gallants of yours?”

“No,” she shook her head. “No—there is nothing our—men—can do; nothing that we can do. Once, night and day, we were gay. Now we fear—night and day. They mean to destroy us. Our kin have warned us. And our kin can not help us. Those three are masters of blade and flame. Against blade and flame we are helpless.”

“Surely will they destroy us,” murmured the woman. “We shall wither—all of us. Like her there, or burn—unless——”

Suddenly she threw white arms around McKay’s neck. She pressed her body close to him. Her scarlet mouth sought and found his lips and clung to them. Through all McKay’s body ran swift, sweet flames, green fire of desire. His own arms went around her, crushed her to him.

“You shall not die!” he cried. “No—by God, you shall not!”

She drew back her head, looked deep into his eyes.

“They have sworn to destroy us,” she said, “and soon. With blade and flame they will destroy us—those three—unless——”

“Unless?” he asked, fiercely.

“Unless you—slay them first!” she answered.

A cold shock ran through McKay, chilling the fires of his desire. He dropped his arm from around the woman, thrust her from him. For an instant she trembled before him.

“Slay!” he heard her whisper—and she was gone.

The spectral trees wavered; their outlines thickened out of immateriality into substance. The green translucence darkened. He had a swift vertiginous moment as though he swung between two worlds. He closed his eyes. The dizziness passed and he opened them, looked around him.

He stood on the lakeward skirts of the little coppice. There were no shadows flitting, no sign of white women nor of swarthy, green-clad men. His feet were on green moss. Gone was the soft golden carpet with its bluets. Birches and firs clustered solidly before him.

At his left was a sturdy fir in whose needled arms a broken birch tree lay withering. It was the birch that Polleau’s son had so wantonly slashed down. For an instant he saw within the fir and birch the immaterial outlines of the green-clad man and the slim girl who

withered. For that instant birch and fir and girl and man seemed one and the same. He stepped back, and his hands touched the smooth, cool bark of another birch that rose close at his right.

Upon his hands the touch of that bark was like—was like what? Curiously was it like the touch of the long slim hands of the woman of the scarlet lips!

McKay stood there, staring, wondering, like a man who has but half awakened from dream. And suddenly a little wind stirred the leaves of the rounded birch beside him. The leaves murmured, sighed. The wind grew stronger and the leaves whispered.

"Slay!" he heard them whisper—and again: "Slay! Help us! Slay!"

And the whisper was the voice of the woman of the scarlet lips!

Rage, swift and unreasoning, sprang up in McKay. He began to run up through the coppice, up to where he knew was the old lodge in which dwelt Polleau and his sons. And as he ran the wind blew stronger about him, and louder and louder grew the whispering of the trees.

"Slay!" they whispered. "Slay them! Save us! Slay!"

"I will slay! I will save you!" McKay, panting, hammer pulse beating in his ears, heard himself answering that ever more insistent command. And in his mind was but one desire—to clutch the throats of Polleau and his sons, to crack their necks; to stand by them then and watch them wither—wither like that slim girl in the arms of the green-clad man.

He came to the edge of the coppice and burst from it out into a flood of sunshine. For a hundred feet he ran, and then he was aware that the whispering command was stilled; that he heard no more that maddening rustling of wrathful leaves. A spell seemed to have been loosed from him; it was as though he had broken through some web of sorcery. McKay stopped, dropped upon the ground, buried his face in the grasses.

He lay there marshaling his thoughts into some order of sanity. What had he been about to do? To rush upon those three men who lived in the old lodge and—slay them! And for what? Because that unearthly, scarlet-lipped woman whose kisses he still could feel upon his mouth had bade him! Because the whispering trees of the little wood had maddened him with that same command! For this he had been about to kill three men!

What were that woman and her sisters and the green-clad swarthy gallants of theirs? Illusions of some waking dream—phantoms born of the hypnosis of the swirling mists through which he had rowed and floated across the lake? Such things were not uncommon. McKay knew of those who by watching the shifting clouds could create

and dwell for a time with wide-open eyes within some similar land of fantasy; knew others who needed but to stare at smoothly falling water to set themselves within a world of waking dreams; there were those who could summon dreams by gazing into a ball of crystal, others who found dream-life in saucers of shining ink.

Might not the moving mists have laid those same fingers of hypnosis upon his own mind?—and his love for the trees, the sense of appeal that he had felt so long, his memory of the wanton slaughter of the slim birch have all combined to paint upon his drugged consciousness the fantasies he had beheld?

McKay arose to his feet, shakily enough. He looked back at the coppice. There was no wind now; the leaves were silent, motionless. Reason with himself as he might, something deep within him stubbornly asserted the reality of his experience. At any rate, he told himself, the little wood was far too beautiful to be despoiled.

The old lodge was about a quarter of a mile away. A path led up to it through the ragged fields. McKay walked up the path, climbed rickety steps and paused, listening. He heard voices and knocked. The door was flung open and old Polleau stood there, peering at him through half-shut, suspicious eyes. One of the sons stood close behind him. They stared at McKay with grim, hostile faces.

He thought he heard a faint, far-off despairing whisper from the distant wood. And it was as though the pair in the doorway heard it too, for their gaze shifted from him to the coppice, and he saw hatred flicker swiftly across their grim faces. Their gaze swept back to him.

"What do you want?" demanded Polleau, curtly.

"I am a neighbor of yours, stopping at the inn——" began McKay, courteously.

"I know who you are," Polleau interrupted, brusquely, "but what is it that you want?"

"I find the air of this place good for me." McKay stifled a rising anger. "I am thinking of staying for a year or more until my health is fully recovered. I would like to buy some of your land and build me a lodge upon it."

"Yes, *M'sieu*?" There was acid politeness now in the old man's voice. "But is it permitted to ask why you do not remain at the inn? Its fare is excellent and you are well-liked there."

"I have desire to be alone," replied McKay. "I do not like people too close to me. I would have my own land, and sleep under my own roof."

"But why come to me" asked Polleau. "There are many places upon the far side of the lake that you could secure. It is happy there,

and this side is not happy, *M'sieu*. But tell me, what part of my land is it that you desire?"

"That little wood yonder," answered McKay, and pointed to the coppice.

"Ah! I thought so!" whispered Polleau, and between him and his son passed a look of somber understanding.

"That wood is not for sale, *M'sieu*," he said.

"I can afford to pay well for what I want," said McKay. "Name your price."

"It is not for sale," repeated Polleau, stolidly, "at any price."

"Oh, come," urged McKay, although his heart sank at the finality in that answer. "You have many acres and what is it but a few trees? I can afford to gratify my fancies. I will give you all the worth of your other land for it."

"You have asked what that place that you so desire is, and you have answered that it is but a few trees," said Polleau, slowly, and the tall son behind him laughed, abruptly, maliciously. "But it is more than that, *M'sieu*—oh, much more than that. And you know it, else why should you pay such a price as you offer? Yes, you know it—since you know also that we are ready to destroy it, and you would save it. And who told you all that, *M'sieu*?" he snarled.

There was such malignance, such black hatred in the face thrust suddenly close to McKay's; eyes blazing, teeth bared by uplifted lip, that involuntarily he recoiled.

"Only a few trees!" snarled old Polleau. "Then who told him what we mean to do—eh, *Pierre*?"

Again the son laughed. And at that laughter McKay felt within him resurgence of his own blind hatred as he had fled through the whispering wood. He mastered himself, turned away; there was nothing he could do—now. Polleau halted him.

"*M'sieu*," he said, "enter. There is something I would tell you; something, too, I would show you."

He stood aside, bowing with a rough courtesy. McKay walked through the doorway. Polleau with his son followed him. He entered a large, dim room whose ceiling was spanned with smoke-blackened beams. From these beams hung onion strings and herbs and smoke-cured meats. On one side was a wide fireplace. Huddled beside it sat Polleau's other son. He glanced up as they entered, and McKay saw that a bandage covered one side of his head, hiding his left eye. McKay recognized him as the one who had cut down the slim birch. The blow of the fir, he reflected with a certain satisfaction, had been no futile one.

Old Polleau strode over to that son.

"Look, *M'sieu*," he said, and lifted the bandage.

McKay saw, with a tremor of horror, a gaping blackened socket, red-rimmed and eyeless.

"Good God, Polleau!" he cried. "But this man needs medical attention. I know something of wounds. Let me go across the lake and bring back my kit. I will attend him."

Old Polleau shook his head, although his grim face for the first time softened. He drew the bandages back in place.

"It heals," he said. "We have some skill in such things. You saw what did it. You watched from your boat as the cursed tree struck him. The eye was crushed and lay upon his cheek. I cut it away. Now he heals. We do not need your aid, *M'sieu*."

"Yet he ought not have cut the birch," muttered McKay, more to himself than to be heard.

"Why not?" asked old Polleau, fiercely, "since it hated him."

McKay stared at him. What did this old peasant know? The words strengthened his stubborn conviction that what he had seen and heard in the coppice had been actuality—no dream. And still more did Polleau's next words strengthen that conviction.

"*M'sieu*," he said, "you come here as ambassador—of a sort. The wood has spoken to you. Well, as ambassador I shall speak to you. Four centuries my people have lived in this place. A century we have owned this land. *M'sieu*, in all those years there has been no moment that the trees have not hated us—nor we the trees.

"For all those hundred years there have been hatred and battle between us and the forest. My father, *M'sieu*, was crushed by a tree, my elder brother crippled by another. My father's father, woodsman that he was, was lost in the forest; he came back to us with mind gone, raving of wood-women who had bewitched and mocked him, lured him into swamp and fen and tangled thicket, tormenting him. In every generation the trees have taken their toll of us—women as well as men—maiming or killing us."

"Accidents," interrupted McKay. "This is childish, Polleau. You can not blame the trees."

"In your heart you do not believe so," said Polleau. "Listen, the feud is an ancient one. Centuries ago it began when we were serfs, slaves of the nobles. To cook, to keep us warm in winter, they let us pick up the fagots, the dead branches and twigs that dropped from the trees. But if we cut down a tree to keep us warm, to keep our women and our children warm, yes, if we but tore down a branch—they hanged us, or threw us into dungeons to rot, or whipped us till our backs were red lattices.

"They had their broad fields, the nobles—but we must raise our food in the patches where the trees disdained to grow. And if they did thrust themselves into our poor patches, then, *M'sieu*, we must

let them have their way—or be flogged, or be thrown into the dungeons, or be hanged.

"They pressed us in—the trees," the old man's voice grew sharp with fanatic hatred. "They stole our fields and they took the food from the mouths of our children; they dropped their fagots to us like dole to beggars; they tempted us to warmth when the cold struck to our bones—and they bore us as fruit aswing at the end of the foresters' ropes if we yielded to their tempting.

"Yes, *M'sieu*—we died of cold that they might live! Our children died of hunger that their young might find root-space! They despised us—the trees! We died that they might live—and we were men!

"Then, *M'sieu*, came the Revolution and the freedom. Ah, *M'sieu*, then we took our toll! Great logs roaring in the winter cold—no more huddling over the alms of fagots. Fields where the trees had been—no more starving of our children that theirs might live. Now the trees were the slaves and we the masters.

"And the trees knew, and they hated us!

"But blow for blow, a hundred of their lives for each life of ours—we have returned their hatred. With ax and torch we have fought them——

"The trees!" shrieked Polleau suddenly, eyes blazing red rage, face writhing, foam at the corners of his mouth and gray hair clutched in rigid hands. "The cursed trees! Armies of the trees creeping—creeping—closer, ever closer—crushing us in! Stealing our fields as they did of old! Building their dungeon round us as they built of old the dungeons of stone! Creeping—creeping! Armies of trees! Legions of trees! The trees! The cursed trees!"

McKay listened, appalled. Here was crimson heart of hate. Madness! But what was at the root of it? Some deep inherited instinct, coming down from forefathers who had hated the forest as the symbol of their masters—forefathers whose tides of hatred had overflowed to the green life on which the nobles had laid their taboo, as one neglected child will hate the favorite on whom love and gifts are lavished? In such warped minds the crushing fall of a tree, the maiming sweep of a branch, might appear as deliberate; the natural growth of the forest seem the implacable advance of an enemy.

And yet—the blow of the fir as the cut birch fell *had* been deliberate! And there had been those women of the wood——

"Patience," the standing son touched the old man's shoulder. "Patience! Soon we strike our blow."

Some of the frenzy died out of Polleau's face.

"Though we cut down a hundred," he whispered, "by the hundred they return! But one of us, when they strike—he does not

return, no! They have numbers and they have—time. We are now but three, and we have little time. They watch us as we go through the forest, alert to trip, to strike, to crush!

"But, *M'sieu*," he turned bloodshot eyes to McKay, "we strike our blow, even as Pierre has said. We strike at that coppice that you so desire. We strike there because it is the very heart of the forest. There the secret life of the forest runs at full tide. We know—and you know! Something that, destroyed, will take the heart out of the forest—will make it know us for its masters."

"The women!" The standing son's eyes glittered, malignantly. "I have seen the women there! The fair women with the shining skins who invite—and mock and vanish before hands can seize them."

"The fair women who peer into our windows in the night—and mock us!" muttered the eyeless son.

"They shall mock no more!" shouted old Polleau. "Soon they shall lie, dying! All of them—all of them! They die!"

He caught McKay by the shoulders and shook him like a child.

"Go tell them that!" he shouted. "Say to them that this very day we destroy them. Say to them it is *we* who will laugh when winter comes and we watch their bodies blaze in this hearth of ours and warm us! Go—tell them that!"

He spun McKay around, pushed him to the door, opened it and flung him staggering down the steps. He heard the tall son laugh, the door close. Blind with rage he rushed up the steps and hurled himself against the door. Again the tall son laughed. McKay beat at the door with clenched fists, cursing. The three within paid no heed. Despair began to dull his rage. Could the trees help him—counsel him? He turned and walked slowly down the field path to the little wood.

Slowly and ever more slowly he went as he neared it. He had failed. He was a messenger bearing a warrant of death. The birches were motionless, their leaves hung listlessly. It was as though they knew he had failed. He paused at the edge of the coppice. He looked at his watch, noted with faint surprise that already it was high noon. Short shrift enough had the little wood. The work of destruction would not be long delayed.

McKay squared his shoulders and passed in between the trees. It was strangely silent in the coppice. And it was mournful. He had a sense of life brooding around him, withdrawn into itself, sorrowing. He passed through the silent, mournful wood until he reached the spot where the rounded, gleaming-barked tree stood close to the fir that held the withering birch. Still there was no sound, no move-

ment. He laid his hands upon the cool bark of the rounded tree.

"Let me see again!" he whispered. "Let me hear! Speak to me!"

There was no answer. Again and again he called. The coppice was silent. He wandered through it, whispering, calling. The slim birches stood, passive, with limbs and leaves adroop like listless arms and hands of captive maids awaiting in dull woe the will of conquerors. The firs seemed to crouch like hopeless men with heads in hands. His heart ached to the woe that filled the little wood, this hopeless submission of the trees.

When, he wondered, would Polleau strike? He looked at his watch again: an hour had gone by. How long would Polleau wait? He dropped to the moss, against a smooth bole.

And suddenly it seemed to McKay that he was a madman—as mad as Polleau and his sons. Calmly, he went over the old peasant's indictment of the forest, recalled the face and eyes filled with fanatic hate. They were all mad. After all, the trees were—only trees. Polleau and his sons—so he reasoned—had transferred to them the bitter hatred their forefathers had felt for those old lords who had enslaved them; had laid upon them too all the bitterness of their own struggle to exist in this high forest land. When they struck at the trees, it was the ghosts of those forefathers striking at the nobles who had oppressed them; it was themselves striking against their own destiny. The trees were but symbols. It was the warped minds of Polleau and his sons that clothed them in false semblance of conscious life, blindly striving to wreak vengeance against the ancient masters and the destiny that had made their lives one hard and unceasing battle against nature. The nobles were long dead, for destiny can be brought to grips by no man. But the trees were here and alive. Clothed in mirage, through them the driving lust for vengeance could be sated. So much for Polleau and his sons.

And he, McKay: was it not his own deep love and sympathy for the trees that similarly had clothed them in that false semblance of conscious life? Had he not built his own mirage? The trees did not really mourn, could not suffer, could not—know. It was his own sorrow that he had transferred to them; only his sorrow, that he felt echoing back to him from them. The trees were—only trees.

Instantly, upon the heels of that thought, as though it were an answer, he was aware that the trunk against which he leaned was trembling; that the whole coppice was trembling; that all the little leaves were shaking, tremulously.

McKay, bewildered, leaped to his feet. Reason told him that it was the wind—yet there was no wind!

And as he stood there, a sighing arose as though a mournful breeze were blowing through the trees—and again there was no wind!

Louder grew the sighing and within it now faint wailings.
"They come! They come! Farewell, sisters! Sisters—farewell!"
Clearly he heard the mournful whispers.

McKay began to run through the trees to the trail that led out to the fields of the old lodge. And as he ran the wood darkened as though clear shadows gathered in it, as though vast unseen wings hovered over it. The trembling of the coppice increased; bough touched bough, clung to each other; and louder became the sorrowful crying: "Farewell, sister! Sister—farewell!"

McKay burst out into the open. Halfway between him and the lodge were Polleau and his sons. They saw him; they pointed and lifted mockingly to him their bright axes. He crouched, waiting for them to come close, all fine-spun theories gone, and rising within him that same rage which hours before had sent him out to slay.

So crouching, he heard from the forested hills a roaring clamor. From every quarter it came, wrathful, menacing; like the voices of legions of great trees bellowing through the horns of tempest. The clamor maddened McKay; fanned the flame of rage to white heat.

If the three men heard it, they gave no sign. They came on steadily, jeering at him, waving their blades. He ran to meet them.

"Go back!" he shouted. "Go back, Polleau! I warn you!"

"He warns us!" jeered Polleau. "He—Pierre, Jean—he warns us!"

The old peasant's arm shot out and his hand caught McKay's shoulder with a grip that pinched to the bone. The arm flexed and hurled him against the unmaimed son. The son caught him, twisted him about and whirled him headlong a dozen yards, crashing through the brush at the skirt of the wood.

McKay sprang to his feet howling like a wolf. The clamor of the forest had grown stronger.

"Kill!" it roared. "Kill!"

The unmaimed son had raised his ax. He brought it down upon the trunk of a birch, half splitting it with one blow. McKay heard a wail go up from the little wood. Before the ax could be withdrawn he had crashed a fist in the ax-wielder's face. The head of Polleau's son rocked back; he yelped, and before McKay could strike again had wrapped strong arms around him, crushing breath from him. McKay relaxed, went limp, and the son loosened his grip. Instantly McKay slipped out of it and struck again, springing aside to avoid the rib-breaking clasp. Polleau's son was quicker than he, the long arm caught him. But as the arms tightened there was the sound of sharp splintering and the birch into which the ax had bitten toppled. It struck the ground directly behind the wrestling men. Its branches seemed to reach out and clutch at the feet of Polleau's son.

He tripped and fell backward, McKay upon him. The shock of the fall broke his grip and again McKay writhed free. Again he was upon his feet, and again Polleau's strong son, quick as he, faced him. Twice McKay's blows found their mark beneath his heart before once more the long arms trapped him. But the grip was weaker; McKay felt that now their strength was equal.

Round and round they rocked, McKay straining to break away. They fell, and over they rolled and over, arms and legs locked, each striving to free a hand to grip the other's throat. Around them ran Polleau and the one-eyed son, shouting encouragement to Pierre, yet neither daring to strike at McKay lest the blow miss and be taken by the other.

And all that time McKay heard the little wood shouting. Gone from it now was all mournfulness, all passive resignation. The wood was alive and raging. He saw the trees shake and bend as though torn by a tempest. Dimly he realized that the others could hear none of this, see none of it; as dimly wondered why this should be.

"Kill!" shouted the coppice—and ever over its tumult he was aware of the roar of the great forest. "Kill! Kill!"

He saw two shadowy shapes—shadowy shapes of swarthy green-clad men, that pressed close to him as he rolled and fought.

"Kill!" they whispered. "Let his blood flow! Kill!"

He tore a wrist free. Instantly he felt within his hand the hilt of a knife.

"Kill!" whispered the shadowy men.

"Kill!" shrieked the coppice.

"Kill!" roared the forest.

McKay's arm swept up and plunged the knife into the throat of Polleau's son! He heard a choking sob; heard Polleau shriek; felt the hot blood spurt in face and over hand; smelt its salt and faintly acrid odor. The encircling arms dropped from him; he reeled to his feet.

As though the blood had been a bridge, the shadowy men leaped into materiality. One threw himself upon the man McKay had stabbed; the other hurled upon old Polleau. The maimed son turned and fled, howling with terror. A white woman sprang out from the shadow, threw herself at his feet, clutched them and brought him down. Another woman and another dropped upon him. The note of his shrieking changed from fear to agony, then died abruptly into silence.

And now McKay could see none of the trees, neither old Polleau nor his sons, for green-clad men and white women covered them!

He stood stupidly, staring at his red hands. The roar of the forest had changed to a deep triumphal chanting. The coppice was mad

with joy. The trees had become thin phantoms etched in emerald translucent air as they had been when first the green sorcery had meshed him. And all around him wove and danced the slim, gleaming women of the wood.

They ringed him, their song bird-sweet and shrill, jubilant. Beyond them he saw gliding toward him the woman of the misty pillar whose kisses had poured the sweet green fire into his veins. Her arms were outstretched to him, her strange wide eyes were rapt on his, her white body gleamed with the moon radiance, her red lips were parted and smiling, a scarlet chalice filled with the promise of undreamed ecstasies. The dancing circle, chanting, broke to let her through.

Abruptly, a horror filled McKay—not of this fair woman, not of her jubilant sister, but of himself.

He had killed! And the wound the war had left in his soul, the wound he thought had healed, had opened.

He rushed through the broken circle, thrust the shining woman aside with his blood-stained hands and ran, weeping, toward the lake shore. The singing ceased. He heard little cries, tender, appealing little cries of pity, soft voices calling on him to stop, to return. Behind him was the sound of little racing feet, light as the fall of leaves upon the moss.

McKay ran on. The coppice lightened, the beach was before him. He heard the fair woman call him, felt the touch of her hand upon his shoulder. He did not heed her. He ran across the narrow strip of beach, thrust his boat out into the water and wading through the shallows threw himself into it.

He lay there for a moment, sobbing, then drew himself up and caught at the oars. He looked back at the shore now a score of feet away. At the edge of the coppice stood the woman, staring at him with pitying, wise eyes. Behind her clustered the white faces of her sisters, the swarthy faces of the green-clad men.

"Come back!" the woman whispered, and held out to him slender arms.

McKay hesitated, his horror lessening in that clear, wise gaze. He half swung the boat around. But his eyes fell again upon his blood-stained hands and again the hysteria gripped him. One thought only was in his mind now—to get far away from where Polleau's son lay with his throat ripped open, to put the lake between him and that haunted shore. He dipped his oars deep, flung the boat forward. Once more the woman called to him and once again. He paid no heed. She threw out her arms in a gesture of passionate farewell. Then a mist dropped like a swift curtain between him and her and all the folk of the little wood.

McKay rowed on, desperately. After a while he shipped oars, and leaning over the boat's side he washed away the red on his hands and arms. His coat was torn and blood-stained; his shirt too. The latter he took off, wrapped it around the stone that was the boat's rude anchor and dropped it into the depths. His coat he dipped into the water, rubbing at the accusing marks. When he had lightened them all he could, he took up his oars.

His panic had gone from him. Upon its ebb came a rising tide of regret; clear before his eyes arose the vision of the shining woman, beckoning him, calling him . . . he swung the boat around to return. And instantly as he did so the mists between him and the farther shore thickened; around him they lightened as though they had withdrawn to make of themselves a barrier to him, and something deep within him whispered that it was too late.

He saw that he was close to the landing of the little inn. There was no one about, and none saw him as he fastened the skiff and slipped to his room. He locked the door, started to undress. Sudden sleep swept over him like a wave, drew him helplessly down into ocean depths of sleep.

A knocking at his door awakened McKay, and the innkeeper's voice summoning him to dinner. Sleepily he answered, and as the old man's footsteps died away he roused himself. His eyes fell upon his coat, dry now, and the ill-erased blood-stains splotching it. Puzzled, he stared at them for a moment; then full memory clicked back into place.

He walked to the window. It was dusk. A wind was blowing and the trees were singing, all the little leaves dancing; the forest hummed its cheerful vespers. Gone as all the unease, all the inarticulate trouble and the fear. The woods were tranquil and happy.

He sought the coppice through the gathering twilight. Its demoiselles were dancing lightly in the wind, leafy hoods dipping, leafy skirts ablow. Beside them marched their green troubadours, carefree, waving their needled arms. Gay was the little wood, gay as when its beauty had first lured him to it.

McKay hid the stained coat in his traveling-trunk, bathed and put on a fresh outfit and sauntered down to dinner. He ate excellently. Wonder now and then crossed his mind that he felt no regret, no sorrow even for the man he had killed. He was half inclined to believe it had all been only a dream—so little of any emotion did he feel. He had even ceased to think of what discovery might mean.

His mind was quiet; he heard the forest chanting to him that there was nothing he need fear; and when he sat for a time that night upon the balcony a peace that was half an ecstasy stole in

upon him from the murmuring woods and enfolded him. Cradled by it he slept dreamlessly.

McKay did not go far from the inn that day. The little wood danced gayly and beckoned him, but he paid no heed. Something whispered to wait, to keep the lake between him and it until word came of what lay or had lain there. And the peace still was on him.

Only the old innkeeper seemed to grow uneasy as the hours went by. He went often to the landing, scanning the farther shore.

"It is strange," he said at last to McKay as the sun was dipping behind the summits. "Polleau was to see me here today. If he could not come he would have sent one of his sons."

McKay nodded, carelessly.

"There is another thing I do not understand," went on the old man. "I have seen no smoke from the lodge all day. It is as though they were not there."

"Where could they be?" asked McKay indifferently.

"I do not know," the voice was more perturbed. "It all troubles me, *M'sieu*. Polleau is hard, yes; but he is my neighbor. Perhaps an accident——"

"They would let you know soon enough if there was anything wrong," McKay said.

"Perhaps, but——" the old man hesitated. "If he does not come tomorrow and again I see no smoke, I will go to him," he ended.

McKay felt a little shock run through him; tomorrow, then, he would know, definitely, what it was that had happened in the little wood.

"I would if I were you," he said. "I'd not wait too long, either."

"Will you go with me, *M'sieu*?" asked the old man.

"No!" whispered the warning voice within McKay. "No! Do not go!"

"Sorry," he said, aloud. "But I've some writing to do. If you should need me, send back your man; I'll come."

And all that night he slept, again dreamlessly, while the crooning forest cradled him.

The morning passed without sign from the opposite shore. An hour after noon he watched the old innkeeper and his man row across the lake. And suddenly McKay's composure was shaken, his serene certainty wavered. He unstrapped his field-glasses and kept them on the pair until they had beached the boat and entered the coppice. His heart was beating uncomfortably, his hands felt hot and his lips dry. How long had they been in the wood? It must have been an hour! What were they doing there? What had they found?

He looked at his watch, incredulously. Less than five minutes had passed.

Slowly the seconds ticked by. And it was all of an hour indeed before he saw them come out upon the shore and drag their boat into the water. McKay, throat curiously dry, deafening pulse within his ears, steadied himself, forced himself to stroll leisurely down to the landing.

"Everything all right?" he called as they were near. They did not answer, but as the skiff warped against the landing they looked up at him, and on their faces were stamped horror and a great wonder.

"They are dead, *M'sieu*," whispered the innkeeper. "Polleau and his two sons—all dead!"

McKay's heart gave a great leap, a swift faintness took him.

"Dead!" he cried. "What killed them?"

"What but the trees, *M'sieu*?" answered the old man, and McKay thought that his gaze dwelt upon him strangely. "The trees killed them. See—we went up the little path through the wood, and close to its end we found it blocked by fallen trees. The flies buzzed round those trees, *M'sieu*, so we searched there. They were under them, Polleau and his sons. A fir had fallen upon Polleau and had crushed in his chest. Another son we found beneath a fir and up-turned birches. They had broken his back, and an eye had been torn out—but that was no new wound, the latter."

He paused.

"It must have been a sudden wind," said his man; "yet I never knew of a wind such as that must have been. There were no trees down except those that lay upon them. And of those it was as though they had leaped out of the ground! Yes, as though they had leaped out of the ground upon them. Or it was as though giants had torn them out for clubs. They were not broken—their roots were bare——"

"But the other son—Polleau had two?" Try as he might, McKay could not keep the tremor out of his voice.

"Pierre," said the old man, and again McKay felt that strange quality in his gaze. "He lay beneath a fir. His throat was torn out!"

"His throat torn out!" whispered McKay. His knife! His knife! The knife that had been slipped into his hand by the shadowy shapes!

"His throat was torn out," repeated the innkeeper. "And in it still was the broken branch that had done it. A broken branch, *M'sieu*, pointed like a knife. It must have caught Pierre as the fir fell, and ripping through his throat, been broken off as the tree crashed."

McKay stood, mind whirling in wild conjecture. "You said—a broken branch?" he asked through lips gone white.

"A broken branch, *M'sieu*." The innkeeper's eyes searched him.

"It was very plain—what it was that happened. Jacques," he turned to his man, "go up to the house."

He watched until the man shuffled out of sight.

"Yet not all is so plain, *M'sieu*," he spoke low to McKay, "since in Pierre's hand I found—this."

He reached into a pocket and drew out a button from which hung a strip of cloth. They had once been part of that stained coat which McKay had hidden in his trunk. And as McKay strove to speak, the old man raised his hand. Button and cloth dropped from it, into the water. A wave took it and floated it away; another and another snatched it and passed it on. They watched it, silently, until it had vanished.

"Tell me nothing," said the keeper of the inn. "Polleau was a hard man, and hard men were his sons. The trees hated them. The trees killed them. The—souvenir—is gone. Only *M'sieu* would better also—go."

That night McKay packed. When dawn had broken he stood at his window, looking long at the little wood. It too was awakening, stirring sleepily—like drowsy, delicate demoiselles. He thought he could see that one slim birch that was—what? Tree or woman? Or both?

Silently, the old landlord and his wife watched him as he swung out his car—a touch of awe, a half-fear, in their eyes. Without a word they let him go.

And as McKay swept up the road that led over the lip of the green bowl, he seemed to hear from all the forest a deep-toned, mournful chanting. It arose around him as he topped the rise in one vast whispering cloud—of farewell—and died.

Never, he knew, would that green door of enchantment be opened to him again. His fear had closed it—for ever. Something had been offered to him beyond mortal experience—something that might have raised him to the level of the gods of Earth's youth. He had rejected it. And nevermore, he knew, would he cease to regret.

Though during his latter years, H. G. Wells rated his sociological studies as his most important works, it is our opinion that the most lasting legacies this literary giant left will prove ultimately to be those works he rated "Fantastic and Imaginative Romances." Written during the earliest years of his career, Wells laid down in their pages, many of the basic themes of the modern science-fiction story. Wells could and did see things in science and living that others were prone to overlook. Take the question that vexes so many, that of losing weight. Pyecraft was a fat man who wanted a solution to that problem. He found it, and with that what unexpected results, you may see for yourself. . . .

The Truth About Pyecraft

by H. G. Wells

H

E SITS not a dozen yards away. If I glance over my shoulder I can see him. And if I catch his eye—and usually I catch his eye—it meets me with an expression—

It is mainly an imploring look—and yet with suspicion in it.

Confound his suspicion! If I wanted to tell on him I should have told long ago. I don't tell and I don't tell, and he ought to feel at his ease. As if anything so gross and fat as he could feel at ease! Who would believe me if I did tell?

Poor old Pyecraft! Great, uneasy jelly of substance! The fattest clubman in London.

He sits at one of the little club tables in the huge bay by the fire, stuffing. What is he stuffing? I glance judiciously, and catch him biting at a round of hot buttered teacake, with his eyes on me. Confound him!—with his eyes on me!

That settles it, Pyecraft! Since you *will* be abject, since you *will* behave as though I was not a man of honour, here, right under your embedded eyes, I write the thing down—the plain truth about Pyecraft. The man I helped, the man I shielded, and who has requited me by making my club unendurable, absolutely unendurable, with his liquid appeal, with the perpetual "don't tell" of his looks.

And, besides, why does he keep on eternally eating?

Well, here goes for the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth!

Pyecraft—— I made the acquaintance of Pyecraft in this very smoking-room. I was a young, nervous new member, and he saw it. I was sitting all alone, wishing I knew more of the members, and suddenly he came, a great rolling front of chins and abdomina, towards me, and grunted and sat down in a chair close by me and wheezed for a space, and scraped for a space with a match and lit a cigar, and then addressed me. I forget what he said—something about the matches not lighting properly, and afterwards as he talked he kept stopping the waiters one by one as they went by, and telling them about the matches in that thin, fluty voice he has. But, anyhow, it was in some such way we began our talking.

He talked about various things and came round to games. And thence to my figure and complexion. "You ought to be a good cricketer," he said. I suppose I am slender, slender to what some people would call lean, and I suppose I am rather dark, still—— I am not ashamed of having a Hindu great-grandmother, but, for all that, I don't want casual strangers to see through me at a glance to *her*. So that I was set against Pyecraft from the beginning.

But he only talked about me in order to get to himself.

"I expect," he said, "you take no more exercise than I do, and probably eat no less." (Like all excessively obese people he fancied he ate nothing.) "Yet,"—and he smiled an oblique smile—"we differ."

And then he began to talk about his fatness and his fatness; all he did for his fatness and all he was going to do for his fatness: what people had advised him to do for his fatness and what he had heard of people doing for fatness similar to his. "*A priori*," he said, "one would think a question of nutrition could be answered by dietary and a question of assimilation by drugs." It was stifling. It was dumpling talk. It made me feel swelled to hear him.

One stands that sort of thing once in a way at a club, but a time came when I fancied I was standing too much. He took to me altogether too conspicuously. I could never go into the smoking-room but he would come wallowing towards me, and sometimes he came and gormandised round and about me while I had my lunch. He seemed at times almost to be clinging to me. He was a bore, but not so fearful a bore as to be limited to me; and from the first there was something in his manner—almost as though he knew, almost as though he penetrated to the fact that I *might*—that there was a remote, exceptional chance in me that no one else presented.

"I'd give anything to get it down," he would say—"anything." and peer at me over his vast cheeks and pant. Poor old Pyecraft! He has just gonged: no doubt to order another buttered teacake!

He came to the actual thing one day. "Our Pharmacopœia," he

said, "our Western Pharmacopœia, is anything but the last word of medical science. In the East, I've been told——"

He stopped and stared at me. It was like being at an aquarium.

I was quite suddenly angry with him. "Look here," I said, "who told you about my great-grandmother's recipes?"

"Well," he fenced.

"Every time we've met for a week," I said—"and we've met pretty often—you've given me a broad hint or so about that little secret of mine."

"Well," he said, "now the cat's out of the bag, I'll admit, yes, it is so. I had it——"

"From Pattison?"

"Indirectly," he said, which I believe was lying, "yes."

"Pattison," I said, "took that stuff at his own risk."

He pursed his mouth and bowed.

"My great-grandmother's recipes," I said, "are queer things to handle. My father was near making me promise——"

"He didn't?"

"No. But he warned me. He himself used one——once."

"Ah! . . . But do you think——? Suppose——suppose there did happen to be one——"

"The things are curious documents," I said. "Even the smell of 'em . . . No!"

But after going so far Pycraft was resolved I should go farther. I was always a little afraid if I tried his patience too much he would fall on me suddenly and smother me. I own I was weak. But I was also annoyed with Pycraft. I had got to that state of feeling for him that disposed me to say, "Well, *take the risk!*" The little affair of Pattison to which I have alluded was a different matter altogether. What it was doesn't concern us now, but I knew, anyhow, that the particular recipe I used then was safe. The rest I didn't know so much about, and, on the whole, I was inclined to doubt their safety pretty completely.

Yet even if Pycraft got poisoned——

I must confess the poisoning of Pycraft struck me as an immense undertaking.

That evening I took that queer, odd-scented sandalwood box out of my safe, and turned the rustling skins over. The gentleman who wrote the recipes for my great-grandmother evidently had a weakness for skins of a miscellaneous origin, and his handwriting was cramped to the last degree. Some of the things are quite unreadable to me—though my family, with its Indian Civil Service associations, has kept up a knowledge of Hindustani from generation to generation—and none are absolutely plain sailing. But I found the

one that I knew was there soon enough, and sat on the floor by my safe for some time looking at it.

"Look here," said I to Pyecraft next day, and snatched the slip away from his eager grasp.

"So far as I can make it out, this is a recipe for Loss of Weight. ('Ah!" said Pyecraft.) I'm not absolutely sure, but I think it's that. And if you take my advice you'll leave it alone. Because, you know—I blacken my blood in your interest, Pyecraft—my ancestors on that side were, so far as I can gather, a jolly queer lot. See?"

"Let me try it," said Pyecraft.

I leant back in my chair. My imagination made one mighty effort and fell flat within me. "What in Heaven's name, Pyecraft," I asked, "do you think you'll look like when you get thin?"

He was impervious to reason. I made him promise never to say a word to me about his disgusting fatness again whatever happened—never, and then I handed him that little piece of skin.

"It's nasty stuff," I said.

"No matter," he said, and took it.

He goggled at it. "But—but——" he said.

He had just discovered that it wasn't English.

"To the best of my ability," I said, "I will do you a translation."

I did my best. After that we didn't speak for a fortnight. Whenever he approached me I frowned and motioned him away, and he respected our compact, but at the end of the fortnight he was as fat as ever. And then he got a word in.

"I must speak," he said. "It isn't fair. There's something wrong. It's done me no good. You're not doing your great-grandmother justice."

"Where's the recipe?"

He produced it gingerly from his pocket-book.

I ran my eye over the items. "Was the egg addled?" I asked.

"No. Ought it to have been?"

"That," I said, "goes without saying in all my poor dear great-grandmother's recipes. When condition or quality is not specified you must get the worst. She was drastic or nothing. . . . And there's one or two possible alternatives to some of these other things. You got *fresh* rattlesnake venom?"

"I got a rattlesnake from Jamrach's. It cost—it cost——"

"That's your affair anyhow. This last item——"

"I know a man who——"

"Yes. H'm. Well, I'll write the alternatives down. So far as I know the language, the spelling of this recipe is particularly atrocious. By the bye, dog here probably means pariah dog."

For a month after that I saw Pyecraft constantly at the club and

as fat and anxious as ever. He kept our treaty, but at times he broke the spirit of it by shaking his head despondently. Then one day in the cloakroom he said, "Your great-grandmother——"

"Not a word against her," I said; and he held his peace.

I could have fancied he had desisted, and I saw him one day talking to three new members about his fatness as though he was in search of other recipes. And then, quite unexpectedly, his telegram came.

"Mr. Formalyn!" bawled a page-boy under my nose, and I took the telegram and opened it at once.

"For Heaven's sake come.—Pycraft."

"H'm," said I, and to tell the truth I was so pleased at the rehabilitation of my great-grandmother's reputation this evidently promised that I made a most excellent lunch.

I got Pycraft's address from the hall porter. Pycraft inhabited the upper half of a house in Bloomsbury, and I went there so soon as I had done my coffee and Trappistine. I did not wait to finish my cigar.

"Mr. Pycraft?" said I, at the front door.

They believed he was ill; he hadn't been out for two days.

"He expects me," said I, and they sent me up.

I rang the bell at the lattice-door upon the landing.

"He shouldn't have tried it, anyhow," I said to myself. "A man who eats like a pig ought to look like a pig."

An obviously worthy woman, with an anxious face and a carelessly placed cap, came and surveyed me through the lattice.

I gave my name and she let me in in a dubious fashion.

"Well?" said I, as we stood together inside Pycraft's piece of the landing.

"'E said you was to come in if you came," she said, and regarded me, making no motion to show me anywhere. And then, confidentially, "'E's locked in, sir."

"Locked in?"

"Locked 'imself in yesterday morning and 'asn't let any one in since, sir. And ever and again *swearing*. Oh, my!"

I stared at the door she indicated by her glances. "In there?" I said.

"Yes, sir."

"What's up?"

She shook her head sadly. "'E keeps on calling for vittles, sir. 'Eavy vittles 'e wants. I get 'im what I can. Pork 'e's had, soot pud-din', sossiges, noo bread. Everythink like that. Left outside, if you please, and me go away. 'E's eatin', sir, somethink *awful*."

There came a piping bawl from inside the door: "That Formallyn?"

"That you, Pyecraft?" I shouted, and went and banged the door.

"Tell her to go away."

I did.

Then I could hear a curious pattering upon the door, almost like some one feeling for the handle in the dark, and Pyecraft's familiar grunts.

"It's all right," I said, "she's gone."

But for a long time the door didn't open.

I heard the key turn. Then Pyecraft's voice said, "Come in."

I turned the handle and opened the door. Naturally I expected to see Pyecraft.

Well, you know, he wasn't there!

I never had such a shock in my life. There was his sitting-room in a state of untidy disorder, plates and dishes among the books and writing things, and several chairs overturned, but Pyecraft——

"It's all right, old man; shut the door," he said, and then I discovered him.

There he was, right up close to the cornice in the corner by the door, as though some one had glued him to the ceiling. His face was anxious and angry. He panted and gesticulated. "Shut the door," he said. "If that woman gets hold of it——"

I shut the door, and went and stood away from him and stared.

"If anything gives way and you tumble down," I said, "you'll break your neck, Pyecraft."

"I wish I could," he wheezed.

"A man of your age and weight getting up to kiddish gymnastics——"

"Don't," he said, and looked agonised.

✓ "I'll tell you," he said, and gesticulated.

"How the deuce," said I, "are you holding on up there?"

And then abruptly I realised that he was not holding on at all, that he was floating up there——just as a gas-filled bladder might have floated in the same position. He began a struggle to thrust himself away from the ceiling and to clamber down the wall to me. "It's that prescription," he panted, as he did so. "Your great-gran——"

He took hold of a framed engraving rather carelessly as he spoke and it gave way, and he flew back to the ceiling again, while the picture smashed on to the sofa. Bump he went against the ceiling, and I knew then why he was all over white on the more salient curves and angles of his person. He tried again more carefully, coming down by way of the mantel.

It was really a most extraordinary spectacle, that great, fat, apo-

plectic-looking man upside down and trying to get from the ceiling to the floor. "That prescription," he said. "Too successful."

"How?"

"Loss of weight—almost complete."

And then, of course, I understood.

"By jove, Pyecraft," said I, "what you wanted was a cure for fatness! But you always called it weight. You would call it weight."

Somehow I was extremely delighted. I quite liked Pyecraft for the time. "Let me help you!" I said, and took his hand and pulled him down. He kicked about, trying to get foothold somewhere. It was very like holding a flag on a windy day.

"That table," he said, pointing, "is solid mahogany and very heavy. If you can put me under that——"

I did, and there he wallowed about like a captive balloon, while I stood on his hearthrug and talked to him.

I lit a cigar. "Tell me," I said, "what happened?"

"I took it," he said.

"How did it taste?"

"Oh, *beastly!*"

I should fancy they all did. Whether one regards the ingredients or the probable compound or the possible results, almost all my great-grandmother's remedies appear to me at least to be extraordinarily uninviting. For my own part——

"I took a little sip first."

"Yes?"

"And as I felt lighter and better after an hour, I decided to take the draught."

"My dear Pyecraft!"

"I held my nose," he explained. "And then I kept on getting lighter and lighter—and helpless, you know."

He gave way suddenly to a burst of passion. "What the goodness am I to *do?*" he said.

"There's one thing pretty evident," I said, "that you mustn't do. If you go out of doors you'll go up and up." I waved an arm upward. "They'd have to send Santos-Dumont after you to bring you down again."

"I suppose it will wear off?"

I shook my head. "I don't think you can count on that," I said.

And then there was another burst of passion, and he kicked out at adjacent chairs and banged the floor. He behaved just as I should have expected a great, fat, self-indulgent man to behave under trying circumstances—that is to say, very badly. He spoke of me and of my great-grandmother with an utter want of discretion.

"I never asked you to take the stuff," I said.

And generously disregarding the insults he was putting upon me, I sat down in his armchair and began to talk to him in a sober, friendly fashion.

I pointed out to him that this was a trouble he had brought upon himself, and that it had almost an air of poetical justice. He had eaten too much. This he disputed, and for a time we argued the point.

He became noisy and violent, so I desisted from this aspect of his lesson. "And then," said I, "you committed the sin of euphuism. You called it, not Fat, which is just and inglorious, but Weight. You——"

He interrupted to say that he recognised all that. What was he to *do*?

I suggested he should adapt himself to his new conditions. So we came to the really sensible part of the business. I suggested that it would not be difficult for him to learn to walk about on the ceiling with his hands——

"I can't sleep," he said.

But that was no great difficulty. It was quite possible, I pointed out, to make a shake-up under a wire mattress, fasten the under things on with tapes, and have a blanket, sheet, and coverlet to button at the side. He would have to confide in his housekeeper, I said; and after some squabbling he agreed to that. (Afterwards it was quite delightful to see the beautifully matter-of-fact way with which the good lady took all these amazing inversions.) He could have a library ladder in his room, and all his meals could be laid on the top of his bookcase. We also hit on an ingenious device by which he could get to the floor whenever he wanted, which was simply to put the *British Encyclopædia* (tenth edition) on the top of his open shelves. He just pulled out a couple of volumes and held on, and down he came. And we agreed there must be iron staples along the skirting, so that he could cling to those whenever he wanted to get about the room on the lower level.

As we got on with the thing I found myself almost keenly interested. It was I who called in the housekeeper and broke matters to her; and it was I chiefly who fixed up the inverted bed. In fact, I spent two whole days at his flat. I am a handy, interfering sort of man with a screw-driver, and I made all sorts of ingenious, adaptations for him—ran a wire to bring his bells within reach, turned all his electric lights up instead of down, and so on. The whole affair was extremely curious and interesting to me, and it was delightful to think of Pyecraft like some great, fat blow-fly, crawling about on his ceiling and clambering round the lintel of his doors from one

room to another, and never, never, never coming to the club any more. . . .

Then, you know, my fatal ingenuity got the better of me. I was sitting by his fire drinking his whisky, and he was up in his favourite corner by the cornice, tacking a Turkey carpet to the ceiling, when the idea struck me. "By Jove, Pyecraft!" I said, "all this is totally unnecessary."

And before I could calculate the complete consequences of my notion I blurted it out. "Lead underclothing," said I, and the mischief was done.

Pyecraft received the thing almost in tears. "To be right ways up again——" he said.

I gave him the whole secret before I saw where it would take me. "Buy sheet lead," I said, "stamp it into discs. Sew 'em all over your underclothes until you have enough. Have lead-soled boots, carry a bag of solid lead, and the thing is done! Instead of being a prisoner here you may go abroad again, Pyecraft; you may travel——"

A still happier idea came to me. "You need never fear a shipwreck. All you need do is just slip off some or all of your clothes, take the necessary amount of luggage in your hand, and float up in the air——"

In his emotion he dropped the tack-hammer within an ace of my head. "By Jove!" he said, "I shall be able to come back to the club again."

The thing pulled me up short. "By Jove!" I said, faintly. "Yes. Of course—you will."

He did. He does. There he sits behind me now, stuffing—as I live!—a third go of buttered teacake. And no one in the whole world knows—except his housekeeper and me—that he weighs practically nothing; that he is a mere boring mass of assimilatory matter, mere clouds in clothing, *niente, nefas*, the most inconsiderable of men. There he sits watching until I have done this writing. Then, if he can, he will waylay me. He will come billowing up to me. . . .

He will tell me over again all about it, how it feels, how it doesn't feel, how he sometimes hopes it is passing off a little. And always somewhere in that fat, abundant discourse he will say, "The secret's keeping, eh? If any one knew of it—I should be so ashamed. . . . Makes a fellow look such a fool, you know. Crawling about on a ceiling and all that. . . ."

And now to elude Pyecraft, occupying, as he does, an admirable strategic position between me and the door.

Humanity is fast approaching the time when explorers shall plunge beyond this earth's grasp and tread the surfaces of other planets. One Army chieftain has said that we may be within eighteen months of this momentous day. What are the mysteries of Atlantis and Lemuria compared to the æon-old arcana awaiting us on those other, most unearthly worlds? Clark Ashton Smith, gifted poet, sculptor, and author, reaches out into the black voids of space to pluck one suggestion of what Mars may mean, when we actually come to breathe the dry and ancient air of that dying world. . . .

The Vaults of Yoh-Vombis

by Clark Ashton Smith

IF THE doctors are correct in their prognostication, I have only a few Martian hours of life remaining to me. In those hours I shall endeavor to relate, as a warning to others who might follow in our footsteps, the singular and frightful happenings that terminated our researches among the ruins of Yoh-Vombis. If my story will only serve to prevent future explorations, the telling will not have been in vain.

There were eight of us, professional archeologists with more or less terrene and interplanetary experience, who set forth with native guides from Ignarh, the commercial metropolis of Mars, to inspect that ancient, æon-deserted city. Allan Octave, our official leader, held his primacy by knowing more about Martian archeology than any other Terrestrial on the planet; and others of the party, such as William Harper and Jonas Halgren, had been associated with him in many of his previous researches. I, Rodney Severn, was more of a newcomer, having spent but a few months on Mars; and the greater part of my own ultra-terrene delvings had been confined to Venus.

The nude, spongy-chested Aihais had spoken deterringly of vast deserts filled with ever-swirling sandstorms, through which we must pass to reach Yoh-Vombis; and in spite of our munificent offers of payment, it had been difficult to secure guides for the journey. Therefore we were surprised as well as pleased when we came to the ruins after seven hours of plodding across the flat, treeless, orange-yellow desolation to the southwest of Ignarh.

We beheld our destination, for the first time, in the setting of the small, remote sun. For a little, we thought that the domeless, three-angled towers and broken-down monoliths were those of some unlegended city, other than the one we sought. But the disposition of the ruins, which lay in a sort of arc for almost the entire extent of a low, gneissic, league-long elevation of bare, eroded stone, together with the type of architecture, soon convinced us that we had found our goal. No other ancient city on Mars had been laid out in that manner; and the strange, many-terraced buttresses, like the stairways of forgotten Anakim, were peculiar to the prehistoric race that had built Yoh-Vombis.

I have seen the hoary, sky-confronting walls of Machu Pichu amid the desolate Andes; and the frozen, giant-built battlements of Uogam on the glacial tundras of the nightward hemisphere of Venus. But these were as things of yesteryear compared to the walls upon which we gazed. The whole region was far from the life-giving canals beyond whose environs even the more noxious flora and fauna are seldom found; and we had seen no living thing since our departure from Ignarh. But here, in this place of petrified sterility, of eternal bareness and solitude, it seemed that life could never have been.

I think we all received the same impression as we stood staring in silence while the pale, sanies-like sunset fell on the dark and megalithic ruins. I remember gasping a little, in an air that seemed to have been touched by the irrespirable chill of death; and I heard the same sharp, laborious intake of breath from others of our party.

"That place is deader than an Egyptian morgue," observed Harper.

"Certainly it is far more ancient," Octave assented. "According to the most reliable legends, the Yorhis, who built Yoh-Vombis, were wiped out by the present ruling race at least forty thousand years ago."

"There's a story, isn't there," said Harper, "that the last remnant of the Yorhis was destroyed by some unknown agency—something too horrible and outré to be mentioned even in a myth?"

"Of course, I've heard that legend," agreed Octave. "Maybe we'll find evidence among the ruins to prove or disprove it. The Yorhis may have been cleaned out by some terrible epidemic, such as the Yashta pestilence, which was a kind of green mold that ate all the bones of the body, starting with the teeth. But we needn't be afraid of getting it, if there are any mummies in Yoh-Vombis—the bacteria will all be dead as their victims, after so many cycles of planetary desiccation."

The sun had gone down with uncanny swiftness, as if it had dis-

appeared through some sort of prestidigitation rather than the normal process of setting. We felt the instant chill of the blue-green twilight; and the ether above us was like a huge, transparent dome of sunless ice, shot with a million bleak sparklings that were the stars. We donned the coats and helmets of Martian fur, which must always be worn at night; and going on to westward of the walls, we established our camp in their lee, so that we might be sheltered a little from the *jaar*, that cruel desert wind that always blows from the east before dawn. Then, lighting the alcohol lamps that had been brought along for cooking purposes, we huddled around them while the evening meal was prepared and eaten.

Afterward, for comfort rather than because of weariness, we retired early to our sleeping-bags; and the two Aihais, our guides, wrapped themselves in the cerement-like folds of *bassa*-cloth which are all the protection their leathery skins appear to require even in sub-zero temperatures.

Even in my thick, double-lined bag, I still felt the rigor of the night air; and I am sure it was this, rather than anything else, which kept me awake for a long while and rendered my eventual slumber somewhat restless and broken. At any rate, I was not troubled by even the least presentiment of alarm or danger; and I should have laughed at the idea that anything of peril could lurk in Yoh-Vombis, amid whose undreamable and stupefying antiquities the very phantoms of its dead must long since have faded into nothingness.

I must have drowsed again and again, with starts of semi-wakefulness. At last, in one of these, I knew vaguely that the small twin moons, Phobos and Deimos, had risen and were making huge and far-flung shadows with the domeless towers; shadows that almost touched the glimmering, shrouded forms of my companions.

The whole scene was locked in a petrific stillness; and none of the sleepers stirred. Then, as my lids were about to close, I received an impression of movement in the frozen gloom; and it seemed to me that a portion of the foremost shadow had detached itself and was crawling toward Octave, who lay nearer to the ruins than we others.

Even through my heavy lethargy, I was disturbed by a warning of something unnatural and perhaps ominous. I started to sit up; and even as I moved, the shadowy object, whatever it was, drew back and became merged once more in the greater shadow. Its vanishment startled me into full wakefulness; and yet I could not be sure that I had actually seen the thing. In that brief, final glimpse, it had seemed like a roughly circular piece of cloth or leather, dark and crumpled, and twelve or fourteen inches in diameter, that ran along the ground with the doubling movement of an inch-worm,

causing it to fold and unfold in a startling manner as it went.

I did not go to sleep again for nearly an hour; and if it had not been for the extreme cold, I should doubtless have gotten up to investigate and make sure whether I had really beheld an object of such bizarre nature or had merely dreamt it. But more and more I began to convince myself that the thing was too unlikely and fantastical to have been anything but the figment of a dream. And at last I nodded off into light slumber.

The chill, demoniac sighing of the *jaar* across the jagged walls awoke me, and I saw that the faint moonlight had received the hueless accession of early dawn. We all arose, and prepared our breakfast with fingers that grew numb in spite of the spirit-lamps.

My queer visual experience during the night had taken on more than ever a phantasmagoric unreality; and I gave it no more than a passing thought and did not speak of it to the others. We were all eager to begin our explorations; and shortly after sunrise we started on a preliminary tour of examination.

Strangely, as it seemed, the two Martians refused to accompany us. Stolid and taciturn, they gave no explicit reason; but evidently nothing would induce them to enter Yoh-Vombis. Whether or not they were afraid of the ruins, we were unable to determine: their enigmatic faces, with the small oblique eyes and huge, flaring nostrils, betrayed neither fear nor any other emotion intelligible to man. In reply to our questions, they merely said that no Aihai had set foot among the ruins for ages. Apparently there was some mysterious taboo in connection with the place.

For equipment in that preliminary tour we took along only our electric torches and a crowbar. Our other tools, and some cartridges of high explosives, we left at our camp, to be used later if necessary, after we had surveyed the ground. One or two of us owned automatics; but these also were left behind; for it seemed absurd to imagine that any form of life would be encountered among the ruins.

Octave was visibly excited as we began our inspection, and maintained a running fire of exclamatory comment. The rest of us were subdued and silent: it was impossible to shake off the somber awe and wonder that fell upon us from those megalithic stones.

We went on for some distance among the triangular, terraced buildings, following the zigzag streets that conformed to this peculiar architecture. Most of the towers were more or less dilapidated; and everywhere we saw the deep erosion wrought by cycles of blowing wind and sand, which, in many cases, had worn into roundness the sharp angles of the mighty walls. We entered some of the towers,

but found utter emptiness within. Whatever they had contained in the way of furnishings must long ago have crumbled into dust; and the dust had been blown away by the searching desert gales.

At length we came to the wall of a vast terrace, hewn from the plateau itself. On this terrace, the central buildings were grouped like a sort of acropolis. A flight of time-eaten steps, designed for longer limbs than those of men or even the gangling modern Martians, afforded access to the hewn summit.

Pausing, we decided to defer our investigation of the higher buildings, which, being more exposed than the others, were doubly ruinous and dilapidated, and in all likelihood would offer little for our trouble. Octave had begun to voice his disappointment over our failure to find anything in the nature of artifacts or carvings that would throw light on the history of Yoh-Vombis.

Then, a little to the right of the stairway, we perceived an entrance in the main wall, half choked with ancient debris. Behind the heap of detritus, we found the beginning of a downward flight of steps. Darkness poured from the opening, noisome and musty with primordial stagnancies of decay; and we could see nothing below the first steps, which gave the appearance of being suspended over a black gulf.

Throwing his torch-beam into the abyss, Octave began to descend the stairs. His eager voice called us to follow.

At the bottom of the high, awkward steps, we found ourselves in a long and roomy vault, like a subterranean hallway. Its floor was deep with siftings of immemorial dust. The air was singularly heavy, as if the lees of an ancient atmosphere, less tenuous than that of Mars today, had settled down and remained in that stagnant darkness. It was harder to breathe than the outer air: it was filled with unknown effluvia; and the light dust arose before us at every step, diffusing a faintness of bygone corruption, like the dust of powdered mummies.

At the end of the vault, before a strait and lofty doorway, our torches revealed an immense shallow urn or pan, supported on short cube-shaped legs, and wrought from a dull, blackish-green material. In its bottom, we perceived a deposit of dark and cinder-like fragments, which gave off a slight but disagreeable pungence, like the phantom of some more powerful odor. Octave, bending over the rim, began to cough and sneeze as he inhaled it.

"That stuff, whatever it was, must have been a pretty strong fumigant," he observed. "The people of Yoh-Vombis may have used it to disinfect the vaults."

The doorway beyond the shallow urn admitted us to a larger chamber, whose floor was comparatively free of dust. We found

that the dark stone beneath our feet was marked off in multiform geometric patterns, traced with ochreous ore, amid which, as in Egyptian cartouches, hieroglyphics and highly formalized drawings were enclosed. We could make little from most of them; but the figures in many were doubtless designed to represent the Yorhis themselves. Like the Aihais, they were tall and angular, with great, bellows-like chests. The ears and nostrils, as far as we could judge, were not so huge and flaring as those of the modern Martians. All of these Yorhis were depicted as being nude; but in one of the cartouches, done in a far hastier style than the others, we perceived two figures whose high, conical craniums were wrapped in what seemed to be a sort of turban, which they were about to remove or adjust. The artist seemed to have laid a peculiar emphasis on the odd gesture with which the sinuous, four-jointed fingers were plucking at these head-dresses; and the whole posture was unexplainably contorted.

From the second vault, passages ramified in all directions, leading to a veritable warren of catacombs. Here, enormous pot-bellied urns of the same material as the fumigating pan, but taller than a man's head and fitted with angular-handled stoppers, were ranged in solemn rows along the walls, leaving scant room for two of us to walk abreast. When we succeeded in removing one of the huge stoppers, we saw that the jar was filled to the rim with ashes and charred fragments of bone. Doubtless (as is still the Martian custom) the Yorhis had stored the cremated remains of whole families in single urns.

Even Octave became silent as we went on; and a sort of meditative awe seemed to replace his former excitement. We others, I think, were utterly weighed down to a man by the solid gloom of a concept-defying antiquity, into which it seemed that we were going farther and farther at every step.

The shadows fluttered before us like the monstrous and misshapen wings of phantom bats. There was nothing anywhere but the atom-like dust of ages, and the jars that held the ashes of a long-extinct people. But, clinging to the high roof in one of the farther vaults, I saw a dark and corrugated patch of circular form, like a withered fungus. It was impossible to reach the thing; and we went on after peering at it with many futile conjectures. Oddly enough, I failed to remember at that moment the crumpled, shadowy object I had seen or dreamt of the night before.

I have no idea how far we had gone, when we came to the last vault; but it seemed that we had been wandering for ages in that forgotten underworld. The air was growing fouler and more irrespir-

able, with a thick, sodden quality, as if from a sediment of material rottenness; and we had about decided to turn back. Then, without warning, at the end of a long, urn-lined catacomb, we found ourselves confronted by a blank wall.

Here we came upon one of the strangest and most mystifying of our discoveries—a mummified and incredibly desiccated figure, standing erect against the wall. It was more than seven feet in height, of a brown, bituminous color, and was wholly nude except for a sort of black cowl that covered the upper head and drooped down at the sides in wrinkled folds. From the size and general contour, it was plainly one of the ancient Yorhis—perhaps the sole member of this race whose body had remained intact.

We all felt an inexpressible thrill at the sheer age of this shriveled thing, which, in the dry air of the vault, had endured through all the historic and geologic vicissitudes of the planet, to provide a visible link with lost cycles.

Then, as we peered closer with our torches, we saw *why* the mummy had maintained an upright position. At ankles, knees, waist, shoulders and neck it was shackled to the wall by heavy metal bands, so deeply eaten and embrowned with a sort of rust that we had failed to distinguish them at first sight in the shadow. The strange cowl on the head, when closer studied, continued to baffle us. It was covered with a fine, mold-like pile, unclean and dusty as ancient cobwebs. Something about it, I know not what, was abhorrent and revolting.

"By Jove! this is a real find!" ejaculated Octave, as he thrust his torch into the mummified face, where shadows moved like living things in the pit-deep hollows of the eyes and the huge triple nostrils and wide ears that flared upward beneath the cowl.

Still lifting the torch, he put out his free hand and touched the body very lightly. Tentative as the touch had been, the lower part of the barrel-like torso, the legs, the hands and forearms all seemed to dissolve into powder, leaving the head and upper body and arms still hanging in their metal fetters. The progress of decay had been queerly unequal, for the remnant portions gave no sign of disintegration.

Octave cried out in dismay, and then began to cough and sneeze, as the cloud of brown powder, floating with airy lightness, enveloped him. We others all stepped back to avoid the powder. Then, above the spreading cloud, I saw an unbelievable thing. The black cowl on the mummy's head began to curl and twitch upward at the corners, it writhed with a verminous motion, it fell from the withered cranium, seeming to fold and unfold convulsively in midair as it fell. Then it dropped on the bare head of Octave who, in his

disconcertment at the crumbling of the mummy, had remained standing close to the wall. At that instant, in a start of profound terror, I remembered the thing that had inched itself from the shadows of Yoh-Vombis in the light of the twin moons, and had drawn back like a figment of slumber at my first waking movement.

Cleaving closely as a tightened cloth, the thing enfolded Octave's hair and brow and eyes, and he shrieked wildly, with incoherent pleas for help, and tore with frantic fingers at the cowl, but failed to loosen it. Then his cries began to mount in a mad crescendo of agony, as if beneath some instrument of infernal torture; and he danced and capered blindly about the vault, eluding us with strange celerity as we all sprang forward in an effort to reach him and release him from his weird incumbrance. The whole happening was mysterious as a nightmare; but the thing that had fallen on his head was plainly some unclassified form of Martian life, which, contrary to all the known laws of science, had survived in those primordial catacombs. We must rescue him from its clutches if we could.

We tried to close in on the frenzied figure of our chief—which, in the far from roomy space between the last urns and the wall, should have been an easy matter. But, darting away, in a manner doubly incomprehensible because of his blindfolded condition, he circled about us and ran past, to disappear among the urns toward the outer labyrinth of intersecting catacombs.

"My God! What has happened to him?" cried Harper. "The man acts as if he were possessed."

There was obviously no time for a discussion of the enigma, and we all followed Octave as speedily as our astonishment would permit. We had lost sight of him in the darkness; and when we came to the first division of the vaults, we were doubtful as to which passage he had taken, till we heard a shrill scream, several times repeated, in a catacomb on the extreme left. There was a shrill, unearthly quality in those screams, which may have been due to the long-stagnant air or the peculiar acoustics of the ramifying caverns. But somehow I could not imagine them as issuing from human lips—at least not from those of a living man. They seemed to contain a soulless, mechanical agony, as if they had been wrung from a devil-driven corpse.

Thrusting our torches before us into the lurching, fleeing shadows, we raced along between rows of mighty urns. The screaming had died away in sepulchral silence; but far off we heard the light and muffled thud of running feet. We followed in headlong pursuit; but, gasping painfully in the vitiated, miasmal air, we were soon compelled to slacken our pace without coming in sight of Octave.

Very faintly, and farther away than ever, like the tomb-swallowed steps of a phantom, we heard his vanishing footfalls. Then they ceased; and we heard nothing, except our own convulsive breathing, and the blood that throbbed in our temple-veins like steadily beaten drums of alarm.

We went on, dividing our party into three contingents when we came to a triple branching of the caverns. Harper and Halgren and I took the middle passage, and after we had gone on for an endless interval without finding any trace of Octave, and had threaded our way through recesses piled to the roof with colossal urns that must have held the ashes of a hundred generations, we came out in the huge chamber with the geometric floor-designs. Here, very shortly, we were joined by the others, who had likewise failed to locate our missing leader.

It would be useless to detail our renewed and hour-long search of the myriad vaults, many of which we had not hitherto explored. All were empty, as far as any sign of life was concerned. I remember passing once more through the vault in which I had seen the dark, rounded patch on the ceiling, and noting with a shudder that the patch was gone. It was a miracle that we did not lose ourselves in that underworld maze; but at last we came back again to the final catacomb, in which we had found the shackled mummy.

We heard a measured and recurrent clangor as we neared the place—a most alarming and mystifying sound under the circumstances. It was like the hammering of ghouls on some forgotten mausoleum. When we drew nearer, the beams of our torches revealed a sight that was no less unexplainable than unexpected. A human figure, with its back toward us and the head concealed by a swollen black object that had the size and form of a sofa cushion, was standing near the remains of the mummy and was striking at the wall with a pointed metal bar. How long Octave had been there, and where he had found the bar, we could not know. But the blank wall had crumbled away beneath his furious blows, leaving on the floor a pile of comet-like fragments; and a small, narrow door, of the same ambiguous material as the cinerary urns and the fumigating-pan, had been laid bare.

Amazed, uncertain, inexpressibly bewildered, we were all incapable of action or volition at that moment. The whole business was too fantastic and too horrifying, and it was plain that Octave had been overcome by some sort of madness. I, for one, felt the violent upsurge of sudden nausea when I had identified the loathsome bloated thing that clung to Octave's head and drooped in obscene tumescence on his neck. I did not dare to surmise the causation of its bloating.

Before any of us could recover our faculties, Octave flung aside the metal bar and began to fumble for something in the wall. It must have been a hidden spring; though how he could have known its location or existence is beyond all legitimate conjecture. With a dull, hideous grating, the uncovered door swung inward, thick and ponderous as a mausolean slab, leaving an aperture from which the nether midnight seemed to well like a flood of eon-buried foulness. Somehow, at that instant, our electric torches appeared to flicker and grow dim; and we all breathed a suffocating fetor, like a draft from inner worlds of immemorial putrescence.

Octave had turned toward us now, and he stood in an idle posture before the open door, like one who has finished some ordained task. I was the first of our party to throw off the paralyzing spell; and pulling out a clasp-knife—the only semblance of a weapon which I carried—I ran over to him. He moved back, but not quickly enough to evade me, when I stabbed with the four-inch blade at the black, turgescient mass that enveloped his whole upper head and hung down upon his eyes.

What the thing was, I should prefer not to imagine—if it were possible to imagine. It was formless as a great slug, with neither head nor tail nor apparent organs—an unclean, puffy, leathery thing, covered with that fine, mold-like fur of which I have spoken. The knife tore into it as if through rotten parchment, making a long gash, and the horror appeared to collapse like a broken bladder. Out of it there gushed a sickening torrent of human blood, mingled with dark, filiated masses that may have been half-dissolved hair, and floating gelatinous lumps like molten bone, and shreds of a curdy white substance. At the same time, Octave began to stagger, and went down at full length on the floor. Disturbed by his fall, the mummy-dust arose about him in a curling cloud, beneath which he lay mortally still.

Conquering my revulsion, and choking with the dust, I bent over him and tore the flaccid, oozing horror from his head. It came with unexpected ease, as if I had removed a limp rag; but I wish to God that I had let it remain. Beneath, there was no longer a human cranium, for all had been eaten away, even to the eye-brows, and the half-devoured brain was laid bare as I lifted the cowl-like object. I dropped the unnamable thing from fingers that had grown suddenly nerveless, and it turned over as it fell, revealing on the nether side many rows of pinkish suckers, arranged in circles about a pallid disk that was covered with nerve-like filaments, suggesting a sort of plexus.

My companions had pressed forward behind me; but, for an appreciable interval, no one spoke.

"How long do you suppose he has been dead?" It was Halgren who whispered the awful question, which we had all been asking ourselves. Apparently no one felt able or willing to answer it; and we could only stare in horrible, timeless fascination at Octave.

At length I made an effort to avert my gaze; and turning at random, I saw the remnants of the shackled mummy, and noted for the first time, with mechanical, unreal horror, the half-eaten condition of the withered head. From this, my gaze was diverted to the newly opened door at one side, without perceiving for a moment what had drawn my attention. Then, startled, I beheld beneath my torch, far down beyond the door, as if in some nether pit, a seething, multitudinous, worm-like movement of crawling shadows. They seemed to boil up in the darkness; and then, over the broad threshold of the vault, there poured the verminous vanguard of a countless army: things that were kindred to the monstrous, diabolic leech I had torn from Octave's eagen head. Some were thin and flat, like writhing, doubling disks of cloth or leather, and others were more or less poddy, and crawled with glugged slowness. What they had found to feed on in the sealed, eternal midnight I do not know; and I pray that I never shall know.

I sprang back and away from them, electrified with terror, sick with loathing, and the black army inched itself unendingly with nightmare swiftness from the unsealed abyss, like the nauseous vomit of horror-sated hells. As it poured toward us, burying Octave's body from sight in a writhing wave, I saw a stir of life from the seemingly dead thing I had cast aside, and saw the loahely struggle which it made to right itself and join the others.

But neither I nor my companions could endure to look longer. We turned and ran between the mighty rows of urns, with the slithering mass of demon leeches close upon us, and scattered in blind panic when we came to the first division of the vaults. Heedless of each other or of anything but the urgency of flight, we plunged into the ramifying passages at random. Behind me, I heard some one stumble and go down, with a curse that mounted to an insane shrieking; but I knew that if I halted and went back, it would be only to invite the same baleful doom that had overtaken the hindmost of our party.

Still clutching the electric torch and my open clasp-knife, I ran along a minor passage which, I seemed to remember, would conduct with more or less directness upon the large outer vault with the painted floor. Here I found myself alone. The others had kept to the main catacombs; and I heard far off a muffled babel of mad cries, as if several of them had been seized by their pursuers.

It seemed that I must have been mistaken about the direction of the passage; for it turned and twisted in an unfamiliar manner, with many intersections, and I soon found that I was lost in the black labyrinth, where the dust had lain unstirred by living feet for inestimable generations. The cinerary warren had grown still once more; and I heard my own frenzied panting, loud and stertorous as that of a Titan in the dead silence.

Suddenly, as I went on, my torch disclosed a human figure coming toward me in the gloom. Before I could master my startlement, the figure had passed me with long, machine-like strides, as if returning to the inner vaults. I think it was Harper, since the height and build were about right for him; but I am not altogether sure, for the eyes and upper head were muffled by a dark, inflated cowl, and the pale lips were locked as if in a silence of tetanic torture—or death. Whoever he was, he had dropped his torch, and he was running blindfold, in utter darkness, beneath the impulsion of that unearthly vampirism, to seek the very fountain-head of the unloosed horror. I knew that he was beyond human help; and I did not even dream of trying to stop him.

Trembling violently, I resumed my flight, and was passed by two more of our party, stalking by with mechanical swiftness and sureness, and cowed with those Satanic leeches. The others must have returned by way of the main passages; for I did not meet them; and I was never to see them again.

The remainder of my flight is a blur of pandemonian terror. Once more, after thinking that I was near the outer cavern, I found myself astray, and fled through a ranged eternity of monstrous urns, in vaults that must have extended for an unknown distance beyond our explorations. It seemed that I had gone on for years; and my lungs were choking with the con-dead air, and my legs were ready to crumble beneath me, when I saw far off a tiny point of blessed daylight. I ran toward it, with all the terrors of the alien darkness crowding behind me, and accursed shadows fluttering before, and saw that the vault ended in a low, ruinous entrance, littered by rubble on which there fell an arc of thin sunshine.

It was another entrance than the one by which we had penetrated this lethal underworld. I was within a dozen feet of the opening when, without sound or other intimation, something dropped upon my head from the roof above, blinding me instantly and closing upon me like a tautened net. My brow and scalp, at the same time, were shot through with a million needle-like pangs—a manifold, ever-growing agony that seemed to pierce the very bone and converge from all sides upon my inmost brain.

The terror and suffering of that moment were worse than aught

which the hells of earthly madness or delirium could ever contain. I felt the foul, vampiric clutch of an atrocious death—and of more than death.

I believe that I dropped the torch; but the fingers of my right hand had still retained the open knife. Instinctively—since I was hardly capable of conscious volition—I raised the knife and slashed blindly, again and again, many times, at the thing that had fastened its deadly folds upon me. The blade must have gone through and through the clinging monstrosity, to gash my own flesh in a score of places; but I did not feel the pain of those wounds in the million-throbbing torment that possessed me.

At last I saw light, and saw that a black strip, loosened from above my eyes and dripping with my own blood, was hanging down my cheek. It writhed a little, even as it hung, and I ripped it away, and ripped the other remnants of the thing, tatter by oozing, bloody tatter, from off my brow and head. Then I staggered toward the entrance; and the wan light turned to a far, receding, dancing flame before me as I lurched and fell outside the cavern—a flame that fled like the last star of creation above the yawning, sliding chaos and oblivion into which I descended. . . .

I am told that my unconsciousness was of brief duration. I came to myself, with the cryptic faces of the two Martian guides bending over me. My head was full of lancinating pains, and half-remembered terrors closed upon my mind like the shadows of mustering harpies. I rolled over, and looked back toward the cavern-mouth, from which the Martians, after finding me, had seemingly dragged me for some little distance. The mouth was under the terraced angle of an outer building, and within sight of our camp.

I stared at the black opening with hideous fascination, and descried a shadowy stirring in the gloom—the writhing, verminous movement of things that pressed forward from the darkness but did not emerge into the light. Doubtless they could not endure the sun, those creatures of ultramundane night and cycle-sealed corruption.

It was then that the ultimate horror, the beginning madness, came upon me. Amid my crawling revulsion, my nausea-prompted desire to flee from that seething cavern-mouth, there rose an abhorrently conflicting impulse to return; to thread my backward way through all the catacombs, as the others had done; to go down where never men save they, the inconceivably doomed and accursed, had ever gone; to seek beneath that damnable compulsion a nether world that human thought can never picture. There was a black light, a soundless calling, in the vaults of my brain: the implanted summons

of the Thing, like a permeating and sorcerous poison. It lured me to the subterranean door that was walled up by the dying people of Yoh-Vombis, to immure those hellish and immortal leeches, those dark parasites that engraft their own abominable life on the half-eaten brains of the dead. It called me to the depths beyond, where dwell the noisome, necromantic Ones, of whom the leeches, with all their powers of vampirism and diabolism, are but the merest minions. . . .

It was only the two Aihais who prevented me from going back. I struggled, I fought them insanely as they strove to retard me with their spongy arms; but I must have been pretty thoroughly exhausted from all the superhuman adventures of the day; and I went down once more, after a little, into fathomless nothingness, from which I floated out at long intervals, to realize that I was being carried across the desert toward Ignarh.

Well, that is all my story. I have tried to tell it fully and coherently, at a cost that would be unimaginable to the sane. . . to tell it before the madness falls upon me again, as it will very soon—as it is doing now. . . . Yes, I have told my story . . . and you have written it all out, haven't you? Now I must go back to Yoh-Vombis—back across the desert and down through all the catacombs to the vaster vaults beneath. Something is in my brain, that commands me and will direct me. . . . I tell you, I must go. . . :

POSTSCRIPT

As an intern in the territorial hospital at Ignarh, I had charge of the singular case of Rodney Severn, the one surviving member of the Octave Expedition to Yoh-Vombis, and took down the above story from his dictation. Severn had been brought to the hospital by the Martian guides of the Expedition. He was suffering from a horribly lacerated and inflamed condition of the scalp and brow, and was wildly delirious part of the time and had to be held down in his bed during recurrent seizures of a mania whose violence was doubly inexplicable in view of his extreme debility.

The lacerations, as will have been learned from the story, were mainly self-inflicted. They were mingled with numerous small round wounds, easily distinguished from the knife-slashes, and arranged in regular circles, through which an unknown poison had been injected into Severn's scalp. The causation of these wounds was difficult to explain; unless one were to believe that Severn's story was true, and was no mere figment of his illness. Speaking for myself, in the light of what afterward occurred, I feel that I have no other resource than to believe it. There are strange things on the red

planet; and I can only second the wish that was expressed by the doomed archeologist in regard to future explorations.

The night after he had finished telling me his story, while another doctor than myself was supposedly on duty, Severn managed to escape from the hospital, doubtless in one of the strange seizures at which I have hinted: a most astonishing thing, for he had seemed weaker than ever after the long strain of his terrible narrative, and his demise had been hourly expected. More astonishing still, his bare footsteps were found in the desert, going toward Yoh-Vombis, till they vanished in the path of a light sandstorm; but no trace of Severn himself has yet been discovered.

NOSTALGIA

*Once every year, in autumn's wistful glow,
The birds fly out over an ocean waste,
Calling and chattering in a joyous haste
To reach some land their inner memories know.
Great terraced gardens where bright blossoms blow,
And lines of mangoes luscious to the taste,
And temple-groves with branches interlaced
Over cool paths—all these their vague dreams show.
They search the sea for marks of their old shore—
For the tall city, white and turreted—
But only empty waters stretch ahead,
So that at last they turn away once more.
Yet sunken deep where alien polyps throng,
The old towers miss their lost, remembered song.*

—H. P. LOVECRAFT

The mind is the last frontier to be explored by the brave. Psychology can be one of the most awesome of sciences, for what it uncovers affects us all, and each of us is part and parcel of the unexplored. H. Russell Wakefield, whose short stories rate him high among British fantasists, narrates here the strange adventure of one who trespassed beyond that last frontier. . . .

The Central Figure

by H. Russell Wakefield

A FEW weeks ago Dr. Landon, of the Porwich County Asylum and one of the greatest alienists of Europe, handed me a roll of papers, saying:

"I think this will interest you. Read it to-night, and come to lunch at the Asylum to-morrow and I'll answer your questions."

And then he took out his driver and went to the first tee.

My feeling towards insanity is compounded almost equally of horror and fascination. It may be morbid, but I can't help that. I have the same irresistible disgust and craving for the reptile house at the Zoo. I abominate snakes—the very thought of one sends shudders down my spine, but whenever I go to the Zoo I am compelled to visit that chamber of horrors. I have no connection with this story, and I only mention this taint of mine to explain why my old and dear friend the doctor placed those papers in my hand. He once before gave me a curious document, composed by the Reverend Wellington Scott, which I published with the title "The Third Coach," which seemed to impress my Lilliputian public, and he promised that if anything of this kind happened again he would let me see it.

After dinner that night I opened the roll of paper. I found it was a manuscript, written in an ornate but erratic handwriting. It ran as follows:

I have been told I was always a queer child, silent, self-absorbed and reserved. I believe this to have been partly owing to the fact that I have no recollection of my father and mother, both of whom died from influenza before my second birthday. I remember gazing

and gazing at their photographs and then bursting into vague but desperate tears. I was brought up by my father's sister. She looked after me with resigned conscientiousness, for though a good and kindly woman she had no particular affection for me, and I must have been a great responsibility to her and almost as great a nuisance. So during those all-important forming years I never knew real love, for my nurses, I suppose, found me an unresponsive little creature, and made little attempt to disguise the fact.

When I was rather more than eight years old I was walking down Oxford Street with my aunt when my eye was caught by something in the window of a toy-shop. It was a tiny model theatre. I stared at it fascinated, and said to my aunt:

"Auntie, I must have that. Will you buy it for me?"

"Another time," she replied, being in a hurry.

"No, now," I said. And I refused to move until I got my way. I was trembling with excitement when I undid the package in my nursery. From that day the course of my life was entirely changed, for I had found something which completely absorbed my imagination.

Apart from the fact that my father had been a frequent playgoer, I can find no hereditary explanation of that overmastering hold the theatre has always had over me. From the day I unpacked that little theatre I have dramatised everything in my mind. I hadn't the slightest desire for any other toy, and I transferred everything I read to its tiny stage. I learnt foreign languages avidly, but only for the purpose of reading the dramatic literature of other countries.

As I have said, my aunt was a kindly woman, and she was also extremely wealthy, and seeing the strength of my obsession she had made for me the finest model theatre I have ever seen. It even had a revolving stage and most elaborate lighting effects. Its company consisted of two hundred characters, including complete casts for *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, and "costume" and modern sets. Amongst them was a complete cast of *Peter Pan*, a great favourite of my aunt's; but these I confess I painted over to the likeness of Roman plebeians for my production of *Julius Caesar*—Barrie's masterpiece made me flinch for some reason or other.

I had a curious tendency to day-dreaming, usually in the evening, when I was tired of playing. During these fits I would see my characters come to life in my mind and drift past me in endless succession. Finally, I would pass into a kind of trance and lose consciousness.

One day, on awaking from such a state, I found that I had set up three figures on the stage to the right front, two men and a woman

between them. For some reason this gave me a sense of uneasiness and some distress of mind, and I moved quickly away and tried to read at the other end of the room. But my uneasiness remained, and sweat burst out on me. Presently I felt compelled to go back to the theatre. How vividly I remember that moment, and my amazement when I saw that the figure of the woman had fallen, and it seemed as though the other two figures had moved farther apart!

During the next three weeks I wasn't troubled, but then again on coming out of another such trance I found those little figures posed just as before. As before, I went to the other end of the room and listened intently. I heard nothing; but when I went back to the theatre it had happened again. The words "subjective" and "objective" were, of course, unknown to me, but I remember wondering in a troubled way whether there was something queer about my eyes.

I think I should have been less worried if this puzzle had happened regularly, but I never knew when it would come, the next day, in a week or a month. I thought of saying something to my governess, but I was certain she'd think I was making it up. My theatre was on wheels, and after a time I took to pushing it into my room at night, setting up the three little figures and trying to hear the tiny "tap" which would signal the fall of the central one; but I always fell asleep, to be woken by a kind of crash in my brain, and I would switch on the light, and there was the central figure prone on the stage and there were the other two moved apart.

It can easily be imagined that such an obsession by day and disturbance by night soon undermined the psychic stamina of a highly imaginative child, and at the age of eleven I had a nervous breakdown, more characteristic, the doctor said, of an over-worked middle-aged man than a small boy. So I was sent off to live in a cottage in the country with a tutor—a lazy, pleasant fellow, but a good linguist, who left me very much to my own devices.

I need hardly say my theatre was left at home. I did not miss it for long, for my mind had passed the stage where I was interested in what I could learn from such a toy. I read furiously—chiefly plays and books on stage technique—and when I was pronounced cured a year later and came back to London I had acquired a knowledge of theatrical theory and practice which would not have been despised by the greatest experts in such matters. In this I was a case of extreme precocity, but otherwise I was backward—except for my knowledge of modern languages—and as I was to go to Eton at thirteen and a half my tutor had to earn his salary to enable me to pass the entrance examination. However, I scraped through when the time came.

I neither liked nor disliked my four years at school. As ever, I kept

myself to myself, and was mercifully allowed so to do. I don't suppose any of my contemporaries even remember my existence, for I was athletically incompetent, scholastically just adequate, socially a complete nonentity. But in those four years I had thought out and outlined the plots of thirty plays and written tens of thousands of lines of steadily improving dialogue, and even then I had evolved a pattern of short and long sentences which is at once aesthetically satisfying without being palpably artificial, and which I have never felt inclined to revise.

Though I had had no experience whatsoever of women, except my aunt and my nurses, I had an instinctive knowledge of the workings of their minds when, as they nearly always do, they diverge drastically from the masculine intellectual bias. I have read these jejune pages often since and have been amazed at my insight. An ounce of insight is worth a ton of experience.

Soon after I left Eton my aunt died, and left her whole fortune in trust to me. I absolutely refused to go to a University, and spent the next two years travelling through Europe and America, studying the latest developments in the technique of stage production. When I returned to London and settled down in the vast Hampstead barrack I had inherited, I had absorbed every lesson which it was necessary for me to learn.

I was now of age, and the first thing I did, was to build on to "Wren Lodge" a small but perfectly furnished theatre, there to experiment with my original and revolutionary theories of stage production. It occurred to me to set these down in writing, and I sent the first of a series of essays on the subject to a famous weekly periodical. The editor printed the whole series, and the widespread attention it secured and the lively, not to say bitter, controversy to which it gave rise, brought me into touch with prominent members of all branches of the theatrical profession—a mixed privilege! I now felt impelled to write a play. I have mentioned that, even at school, I had roughly constructed many plots; since then I had sketched out many more. Now I had to choose one to work on and complete. To my astonishment and irritation, my mind selected a triangle drama, not lacking in subtlety and escaping conventionality, but a meagre vehicle for the employment of my highly original theories of production. However, there it was. My mind would take no denial. It was entitled *The Central Figure*. The chief characters were two men and a woman. One of the men was desperately in love with the woman, who was passionately in love with the other man, he being indifferent to her. The "action" lay in the gradual conception by the discarded suitor of a violent and remorseless detestation for the man who refused to be his rival, and who made his beloved suffer so bit-

terly. This perverted emotion had the effect of almost obliterating his love for the woman, a complex emotional *volte face* which, I believe, was made plausible and convincing by the carefully controlled and constrained urgency of the dialogue.

The ending was melodramatic but sufficiently inevitable, for one day when the three were together the man who loved the woman pulled out a revolver and fired at the man he had come to loathe, but the woman, to save the man she loved, dashed in front of him and was shot dead. This was not the play I—at least, part of “I”—wanted to write; in fact, that part would gladly never have considered it again, but it was out-voted and quelled by the potent residue.

So I went ahead. There were only three characters, and I had most realistic life-size models made of them, and for several weeks I worked out minutely every detail of the action.

Eventually, I came to the climax and the death scene. Suddenly, when I had the three figures precisely placed, I had a sharp sense of *malaise* and distaste. I stood back and stared at them and wondered why. And then a long-buried and forgotten memory came back to me—of a small boy listening, listening in the dark for the light “tap” which would signal the fall of a little wooden figure. I hurried from the theatre and remained away from it for some time in a state of high agitation. And then, just as before years ago, I was driven back to it by an overmastering compulsion. I saw what I had expected yet dreaded to see, for the central figure—the woman—was lying on her back and the other two had moved apart.

I fainted, and did not recover consciousness until my butler came to search for me and brought me round.

For two days I fought incessantly to reinforce that part of me which insistently cried to me to make an end of that vile play, only to have it finally lashed and scourged into submission. The strange compulsion established complete and inexorable domination, and I resisted it no more—in fact, began to cringe to it and bend obsequiously to its bidding. However, I secured one scanty triumph. Over and over again I resisted the temptation to set up those three figures on the right front of the stage and then slink out to the door, leave it ajar and listen for a rather louder “tap.” Yes, I succeeded in resisting that.

I eventually decided to discard the better-known members of the profession, and I picked out three quite obscure individuals. I had met them separately and casually, but in each case I knew at once that I need search no farther, so perfectly were they in character with the parts they had to play. Not only so, but they mysteriously

conformed in appearance to the mental pictures I had always formed of them.

Freida Mortley, who played Marie Salter, had a face which was two-thirds charmingly commonplace and one-third exquisitely strange. Forehead, nose, mouth, chin were well-modelled and pleasing enough, but might have belonged to any pretty young girl; but she had the most fascinating and unexpected eyes. She had thinned down her eyebrows until they were single, delicate strands, adroitly curved. Below them the skin above her eyelashes, which were dense and jet black, swelled down over her eyes so that the pupils were placed high and her eyelids had the true Mongolian swing. The result was feline, sullen and highly exciting; though exaggerated ever so slightly, it would have been equivalent to disfigurement. It made nine men out of ten pursue her with unrestrained ardour; the tenth was indifferent, sometimes even strongly repelled.

Though she lacked intellectual curiosity, she had a temperament to match her face. "Temperament" in actresses usually implies a double dose of original vanity and an equal dose of original bad-temper; in her it was a sign of great emotional flexibility and understanding. In my opinion, she had the highest type of purely feminine intelligence. She had no formed moral sense, but great capacity for selfish self-sacrifice; she would renounce *anything*, suffer *anything* to enjoy *everything*; she had that kind of self-abrogating egoism which has always baffled Moralists of the Book.

I chose Leonard Westbrook for the part of Roderick Fenton, whom my heroine loved in vain. He was essentially a cad—vain, selfish and callous, but how perfectly he fitted the character! He had no great good looks, but he was as healthy, strong and lithe as a panther. I took a great and growing dislike to him, but he was Fenton to the life.

The part of the lover was played by Trevor.

These three stayed with me for a month while we worked out every detail of the production. On one occasion Freida came dashing into my study, very white and trembling, and exclaimed:

"Is your theatre haunted, Leo?"

I stared at her.

"I think it is," she went on, "because I went back just now to fetch a book, and though it was almost dark I could see three figures on the stage in a group, and suddenly one of them fell to the ground. I was terrified!"

I tried to reassure her by suggesting that what she had thought she'd seen had simply been a projection from her own mind, due to her absorption in the play, of which this vision had been an echo—we had been rehearsing all day. But I couldn't reassure myself, and

I strove again and again in vain to rally my will power and decide to stop work for ever on this nightmare drama I had come to loathe and dread, and yet I longed to see performed—a torturing, psychic dualism.

And then one day I accidentally overheard a conversation between Freida and Westbrook which filled me with a wild exhilaration and a wilder fear. For I learnt from it that these three were reproducing my plot in their own lives: that Trevor was passionately in love with Freida, and that she had lost her heart and head to Westbrook, who was that tenth man who regarded her with utter indifference.

And then, suddenly, I realised the truth. These three were mine! I had conceived and born them; they had no existence outside my brain—they were my characters, and I had materialised them. And that was why I had never been able to discover anything about their pasts or antecedents; why no one had ever heard of them; why they had no history, friends, relations; why I had engaged them with such absolute confidence. It was because they were the children of my brain. Freida's swollen, feline, Tartar eyes had been shaped in the womb of my mind. So starkly did I abominate Westbrook that I could hardly remain in his presence, but I had created him the vile thing that he was. And Trevor! And Trevor! Does this sound insane? It may do, but I had an inexorable certainty it was true. Directly I knew it to be so I ceased to rehearse them, for they were not acting—they were living—and I could tell by the growing intensity of their performance, by their ever-heightening excitement and tension, that they would reach perfection without my intervention. In crating them I had inexorably predestined that perfection.

I was not normal at this time. What chance had I to be so? Loathing and loving my play; forever slanting through my consciousness that strange trio. In a whirling and mingled confusion they jostled through my brain. Those little wooden figures, had I created them—those children of my imagination, materialised and passionate? What chance had I? What chance had I?

As time went on I could see from the increasing moroseness of Trevor—of Trevor, and the deepening agony of Freida, that they were approaching the climax. Westbrook was behaving like the blackguard I had made him. Freida's adoration, which she couldn't conceal, bored him, and he shewed it. Trevor watched him dangerously—they were no longer on speaking terms. I had leased the Regency Theatre and fixed the opening night. I decided to cease rehearsals at my own theatre for the week before the first performance, and have just one dress rehearsal at the Regency. But my children disobeyed me, and every day went on and on repeating their scenes upon my stage. And when they left it exhausted, I heard them saying

scraps of dialogue which I had once thought of using and then discarded.

At length the hour for the dress rehearsal came. Everyone was nervous and on edge, even Westbrook was not quite his usual insolent and cynical self. Trevor had been drinking and Freida, as I had known she must, had drugged herself. And it was the most superb performance I or anyone else had ever seen upon a stage. As it drew near its close the atmosphere became heavy with barely suppressed passion, Trevor's face took on an expression of tortured hate; Freida was on the verge of hysteria.

Steadily the tension increased till the climax came, when Trevor takes the revolver from his pocket and aims at his enemy before turning it on himself. As he did so this time his face was wild and working. And then he said something which was not in his part—How? How? How? I know not!

"Keep away, Freida, it's loaded!"

And then he fired, and Westbrook cried out and put his hand to his shoulder. But as Trevor pulled the trigger again Freida flung out her arms and dashed in front of Westbrook and then crashed to the ground, a bullet through her heart. And she fell just where those other figures had fallen . . .

I see I have never described Trevor. He is—he was—he is . . .

And here the MS. ended, but an extraordinary pattern of ink blotches, dots and splashes covered the rest of the page.

"Well," I said to Landon at lunch next day, "what was that weird rigmarole I read last night?"

"I should have thought you'd have recognised it," he replied.

"No."

"What! Oh, of course, you were in Africa at the time. Well, that's one version of the Trevor Case."

"And what was that?"

"Leo Trevor," replied Landon, "was a brilliant young playwright and actor. Whilst working at a play for Miss Mortley and Westbrook, in which he was also to act, he got involved with them in exactly the same way as the narrative describes. As a result he took to drink and went to the devil. Finally, he shot at and wounded Westbrook and killed Miss Mortley, who was trying to save Westbrook. The shock of the tragedy drove him insane."

"But who wrote this account of it?"

"Trevor of course," replied Landon. "The shock had the result of divorcing, as it were, the writer in him from the actor, and he dramatised his own tragedy. In consequence his narrative is an extraordinary mixture of truth and fantastic fabrication. He is here

now, sent from Broadmoor for special examination. He writes that story out about once a week; the rest of the time he spends drawing three figures on the wall, and then stealthily creeping over to the other side of the room and glancing back over his shoulder. Presently he creeps back and rubs out the central figure. So long as he is allowed to do that he is perfectly happy—or appears to be so."

"Will he ever recover?"

"No, nor get much worse. He may live for another forty years."

"How long is it since the Trevor Case?"

"Fifteen years."

"Then it's possible he may spend fifty-five years drawing those figures and rubbing one out?"

"And being perfectly happy to do so. It may seem paradoxical, but many a man is happier mad—as we call it," replied Landon.

*Carriages without horses shall go
And accidents fill the world with woe.
Around the earth thoughts shall fly
In the twinkling of an eye.
The world upside down shall be
And gold be found at the root of a tree.
Through hills man shall ride
And no horse be at his side.
Under water men shall walk,
Shall ride, shall sleep, shall talk.
In the air men shall be seen
In white, in black, in green.
Iron in the water shall float
As easily as a wooden boat.
Gold shall be found and shown
In a land that's not now known.
Fire and water shall wonders do,
England shall at last admit a foe.*

—MOTHER SHIPTON'S PROPHECIES

The famous Irish phantasiist, who has delighted so many with his wonderful works of pure imagination in "A Book of Wonder," "A Dreamer's Tales," and other similar volumes, spins a little tongue-in-cheek yarn of a man who made a small transaction with the devil. Such a slight deal too. . . .

The Three Infernal Jokes

by Lord Dunsany

JHIS is the story that the desolate man told to me on the lonely Highland road one autumn evening with winter coming on and the stags roaring.

The saddening twilight, the mountain already black, the dreadful melancholy of the stags' voices, his friendless mournful face, all seemed to be of some most sorrowful play staged in that valley by an outcast god, a lonely play of which the hills were part and he the actor.

For long we watched each other drawing out of the solitudes of those forsaken spaces. Then when we met he spoke.

"I will tell you a thing that will make you die of laughter. I will keep it to myself no longer. But first I must tell you how I came by it."

I do not give the story in his words with all his woeful interjections and the misery of his frantic self-reproaches for I would not convey unnecessarily to my readers that atmosphere of sadness that was about all he said and that seemed to go with him wherever he moved.

It seems that he had been a member of a club, a West-end club he called it, a respectable but quite inferior affair, probably in the City: agents belonged to it, fire insurance mostly, but life insurance and motor-agents too, it was in fact a touts' club.

It seems that a few of them one evening, forgetting for a moment their encyclopedias and non-stop tires, were talking loudly over a card table when the game had ended about their personal virtues, and a very little man with waxed mustaches who disliked the taste of wine was boasting heartily of his temperance. It was then that he who told this mournful story, drawn on by the boasts of others, leaned

forward a little over the green baize into the light of the two guttering candles and revealed, no doubt a little shyly, his own extraordinary virtue. One woman was to him as ugly as another.

And the silenced boasters rose and went home to bed leaving him all alone, as he supposed, with his unequalled virtue. And yet he was not alone, for when the rest had gone there arose a member out of a deep armchair at the dark end of the room and walked across to him, a man whose occupation he did not know and only now suspects.

"You have," said the stranger, "a surpassing virtue."

"I have no possible use for it," my poor friend replied.

"Then doubtless you would sell it cheap," said the stranger.

Something in the man's manner or appearance made the desolate teller of this mournful tale feel his own inferiority, which probably made him feel acutely shy, so that his mind abased itself as an Oriental does his body in the presence of a superior, or perhaps he was sleepy, or merely a little drunk. Whatever it was he only mumbled, "O yes," instead of contradicting so mad a remark. And the stranger led the way to the room where the telephone was.

"I think you will find my firm will give a good price for it," he said: and without more ado he began with a pair of pincers to cut the wire of the telephone and the receiver. The old waiter who looked after the club they had left shuffling round the other room putting things away for the night.

"Whatever are you doing of?" said my friend.

"This way," said the stranger. Along a passage they went and away to the back of the club and there the stranger leaned out of a window and fastened the severed wires to the lightning conductor. My friend has no doubt of that, a broad ribbon of copper, half an inch wide, perhaps wider, running down from the roof to the earth.

"Hell," said the stranger with his mouth to the telephone; then silence for a while with his ear to the receiver, leaning out of the window. And then my friend heard his poor virtue being several times repeated and then words like Yes and No.

"They offer you three jokes," said the stranger, "which shall make all who hear them simply die of laughter."

I think my friend was reluctant then to have anything more to do with it, he wanted to go home—he said he didn't want jokes.

"They think very highly of your virtue," said the stranger. And at that, odd as it seems, my friend wavered, for logically if they thought highly of the goods they should have paid a higher price.

"O all right," he said.

The extraordinary document that the agent drew from his pocket ran something like this:

"I . . . in consideration of three new jokes received from Mr.

Montagu-Montague, hereinafter to be called the agent, and warranted to be as by him stated and described, do assign to him, yield, abrogate and give up all recognitions, emoluments, perquisites or rewards due to me Here or Elsewhere on account of the following virtue, to wit and that is to say . . . that all women are to me equally ugly." The last eight words being filled in in ink by Mr. Montagu-Montague.

My poor friend duly signed it. "These are the jokes," said the agent. They were boldly written on three slips of paper. "They don't seem very funny," said the other when he had read them. "You are immune," said Mr. Montagu-Montague, "but anyone else who hears them will simply die of laughter: that we guarantee."

An American firm had bought at the price of waste paper a hundred thousand copies of *The Dictionary of Electricity* written when electricity was new,—and it had turned out that even at the time its author had not rightly grasped his subject,—the firm had paid £10,000 to a respectable English paper (no other in fact than the *Briton*) for the use of its name, and to obtain orders for *The Briton Dictionary of Electricity* was the occupation of my unfortunate friend. He seems to have had a way with him. Apparently he knew by a glance at a man, or a look around at his garden, whether to recommend the book as "an absolutely up-to-date achievement, the finest thing of its kind in the world of modern science" or as "at once quaint and imperfect, a thing to buy and to keep as a tribute to those dear old times that are gone." So he went on with his quaint though usual business, putting aside the memory of that night as an occasion on which he had "somewhat exceeded" as they say in circles where a spade is called neither a spade nor an agricultural implement but is never mentioned at all, being altogether too vulgar.

And then one night he put on his suit of dress clothes and found the three jokes in the pocket. That was perhaps a shock. He seems to have thought it over carefully then, and the end of it was he gave a dinner at the club to twenty of the members. The dinner would do no harm he thought—might even help the business, and if the joke came off he would be a witty fellow, and two jokes still up his sleeve.

Whom he invited or how the dinner went I do not know for he began to speak rapidly and came straight to the point, as a stick that nears a cataract suddenly goes faster and faster. The dinner was duly served, the port went round, the twenty men were smoking, two waiters loitered, when he after carefully reading the best of the jokes told it down the table. They laughed. One man accidentally inhaled his cigar smoke and spluttered, the two waiters overheard and tittered behind their hands, one man, a bit of a raconteur himself, quite clearly wished not to laugh, but his veins swelled dangerously in try-

ing to keep it back, and in the end he laughed too. The joke had succeeded; my friend smiled at the thought; he wished to say little deprecating things to the man on his right; but the laughter did not stop and the waiters would not be silent. He waited, and waited wondering; the laughter went roaring on, distinctly louder now, and the waiters as loud as any. It had gone on for three or four minutes when this frightful thought leaped up all at once in his mind: *it was forced laughter!* However could anything have induced him to tell so foolish a joke? He saw its absurdity as in revelation; and the more he thought of it as these people laughed at him, even the waiters too, the more he felt that he could never lift up his head with his brother touts again. And still the laughter went roaring and choking on. He was very angry. There was not much use in having a friend, he thought, if one silly joke could not be overlooked; he had fed them too. And then he felt that he had no friends at all, and his anger faded away, and a great unhappiness came down on him, and he got quietly up and slunk from the room and slipped away from the club. Poor man, he scarcely had the heart next morning even to glance at the papers, but you did not need to glance at them, big type was bandied about that day as though it were common type, the words of the headlines stared at you; and the headlines said:—*Twenty-Two Dead Men at a Club.*

Yes, he saw it then: the laughter had not stopped, some had probably burst blood vessels, some must have choked, some succumbed to nausea, heart failure must have mercifully taken some, and they were his friends after all, and none had escaped, not even the waiters. It was that infernal joke.

He thought out swiftly, and remembers clear as a nightmare, the drive to Victoria Station, the boat-train to Dover and going disguised to the boat: and on the boat pleasantly smiling, almost obsequious, two constables that wished to speak for a moment with Mr. Watkyn-Jones. That was his name.

In a third-class carriage with handcuffs on his wrists, with forced conversation when any, he returned between his captors to Victoria to be tried for murder at the High Court of Bow.

At the trial he was defended by a young barrister of considerable ability who had gone into the Cabinet in order to enhance his forensic reputation. And he was ably defended. It is no exaggeration to say that the speech for the defense showed it to be usual, even natural and right, to give a dinner to twenty men and to slip away without ever saying a word, leaving all, with the waiters, dead. That was the impression left in the minds of the jury. And Mr. Watkyn-Jones felt himself practically free, with all the advantages of his awful experience, and his two jokes intact. But lawyers are still ex-

perimenting with the new act which allows a prisoner to give evidence. They do not like to make no use of it for fear they may be thought not to know of the act, and a lawyer who is not in touch with the very latest laws is soon regarded as not being up to date and he may drop as much as £50,000 a year in fees. And therefore though it always hangs their clients they hardly like to neglect it.

Mr. Watkyn-Jones was put in the witness box. There he told the simple truth, and a very poor affair it seemed after the impassioned and beautiful things that were uttered by the counsel for the defense. Men and women had wept when they heard that. They did not weep when they heard Watkyn-Jones. Some tittered. It no longer seemed a right and natural thing to leave one's guests all dead and to fly the country. Where was Justice, they asked, if anyone could do that? And when his story was told the judge rather happily asked if he could make him die of laughter too. And what was the joke? For in so grave a place as a Court of Justice no fatal effects need be feared. And hesitatingly the prisoner pulled from his pocket the three slips of paper: and perceived for the first time that the one on which the first and best joke had been written had become quite blank. Yet he could remember it, and only too clearly. And he told it from memory to the Court.

"An Irishman once on being asked by his master to buy a morning paper said in his usual witty way, 'Arrah and begorrah and I will be after wishing you the top of the morning.'"

No joke sounds quite so good the second time it is told, it seems to lose something of its essence, but Watkyn-Jones was not prepared for the awful stillness with which this one was received; nobody smiled; and it had killed twenty-two men. The joke was bad, devilish bad; counsel for the defense was frowning, and an usher was looking in a little bag for something the judge wanted. And at this moment, as though from far away, without his wishing it, there entered the prisoner's head, and shone there and would not go, this old bad proverb: "As well be hung for a sheep as for a lamb." The jury seemed to be just about to retire. "I have another joke," said Watkyn-Jones, and then and there he read from the second slip of paper. He watched the paper curiously to see if it would go blank, occupying his mind with so slight a thing as men in dire distress very often do, and the words were almost immediately expunged, swept swiftly as if by a hand, and he saw the paper before him as blank as the first. And they were laughing this time, judge, jury, counsel for the prosecution, audience and all, and the grim men that watched him upon either side. There was no mistake about this joke.

He did not stay to see the end, and walked out with his eyes fixed on the ground, unable to bear a glance to the right or left. And since

then he has wandered, avoiding ports and roaming lonely places. Two years have known him on the Highland roads, often hungry, always friendless, always changing his district, wandering lonely on with his deadly joke.

Sometimes for a moment he will enter inns, driven by cold and hunger, and hear men in the evening telling jokes and even challenging him; but he sits desolate and silent, lest his only weapon should escape from him and his last joke spread mourning in a hundred cots. His beard has grown and turned grey and is mixed with moss and weeds, so that no one, I think, not even the police, would recognize him now for that dapper tout that sold *The Briton Dictionary of Electricity* in such a different land.

He paused, his story told, and then his lips quivered as though he would say more, and I believe he intended then and there to yield up his deadly joke on that Highland road and to go forth then with his three blank slips of paper, perhaps to a felon's cell, with one more murder added to his crimes, but harmless at last to man. I therefore hurried on, and only heard him mumbling sadly behind me, standing bowed and broken, all alone in the twilight, perhaps telling over and over even then the last infernal joke.

CLIMAX FOR A GHOST STORY

"How eerie!" said the girl, advancing cautiously. "—And what a heavy door!" She touched it as she spoke and it suddenly swung to with a click.

"Good Lord!" said the man, "I don't believe there's a handle inside. Why, you've locked us both in!"

"Not both of us. Only one of us," said the girl, and before his eyes she passed straight through the door, and vanished.

—I. A. IRELAND

Avon

MODERN SHORT STORY MONTHLY

Although faced for some time now by sharply rising paper and manufacturing costs, the Avon Book Company has refused to raise the price of the Modern Short Story Monthly. The increased production cost has been absorbed by the company. We have now reached a point, however, where an upward adjustment in the selling price of these books is absolutely necessary. Therefore, starting with No. 35, the Avon Modern Short Story Monthly goes up to 35c per copy. It is with great reluctance that we take this step, and only after the increasingly heavy cost of production has made it impossible for us to sell these books at their former price.

Future issues of the Modern Short Story Monthly will have beautifully laminated full color covers and we will continue, as heretofore, to present only the very best stories by the cream of modern writers.

2. JOHN O'HARA'S *Files on Parade*.
Thirty-five Short Stories.
4. WILLIAM SAROYAN'S *from Inhale & Exhale*.
Thirty-one Selected Stories.
8. W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM'S *First Person Singular*.
More Great Short Stories.
10. JAMES T. FARRELL'S *Selected Modern Stories*.
12. WILLIAM SAROYAN'S *34 More Great Stories*.
13. LOUIS BROMFIELD'S *Three Short Novels*.
14. ERSKINE CALDWELL'S *22 Modern Stories*.
From "Jackpot."
16. FANNIE HURST *Eight Long Short Stories*.
18. W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM'S *Ah King*.
19. EDNA FERBER'S *They Brought Their Women*.
20. *Twelve Selected Modern Stories by Twelve Famous Writers*.
21. JAMES T. FARRELL'S *12 Great Modern Stories*.
23. PEARL BUCK'S *Great Stories of China*.
24. LOUIS BROMFIELD'S *Five Long Short Stories*.
25. *A NEW COLLECTION OF STORIES by Great Modern Writers*.
26. BEN HECHT'S *A Thousand and One Afternoons in New York*.
28. *AN ANTHOLOGY OF SHORT STORIES by Famous Writers*.
29. JOHN O'HARA'S *Hope of Heaven*.
30. ERSKINE CALDWELL'S *Georgia Boy*.
31. *A NEW COLLECTION OF GREAT STORIES*.
32. IRWIN SHAW'S *Welcome To The City*.
33. *AN ANTHOLOGY OF GREAT STORIES*.
34. *GREAT STORIES by Louis Bromfield*.
35. W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM'S *Trembling of a Leaf*.
36. RAPHAEL SABATINI'S *Stories of Love and Adventure*.

READY SHORTLY

37. *A FIRST-RATE COLLECTION OF MODERN STORIES*
38. *BEN HECHT'S COLLECTED SHORT STORIES*

On Sale at Your Newsdealer or from the Publishers

AVON PUBLICATIONS, INC.

119 West 57th Street

New York 19, N. Y.

